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University of
Kent

The Empty Space in Abstract Photography

A Psychoanalytical Perspective

A PhD Thesis submitted by

Evanthia Kalpadaki

to

University College for the Creative Arts / University of Kent in partial
fulfilment for the
Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Art & Communication

24 June 2008

ABSTRACT

The aim of the research that this thesis is based on is to explore the theoretical problems raised by the concept of photographic abstraction. These consist in the tension between the two aspects of the photographic sign, the indexical and iconic, and are examined in the context of the particular exploration of *the empty space in abstract photography* which I have pursued through my practice.

The investigation draws mainly upon the psychoanalytic theory of *transitional phenomena* as proposed by Winnicott, as well as other art theories (Deleuze & Guattari, Ehrenzweig, Fer, Fuller, Greenberg, Joselit, Kuspit, Leider, Worringer) of abstraction. It explores the relationship of the abstract photographic image to notions of exteriority and interiority as these relate to the transition from the unconscious to conscious reality.

The development of this research suggests the psychoanalytical concept of *potential space* as a contribution to an aesthetic model of abstraction. This concept is employed as a methodological tool in the development of the practical work and creates a framework for its interpretation. The concept of *potential space* is based on Winnicott's ideas around "playing with the real" in an intermediate area of experience between the internal and external reality, where creativity originates as a zone of fictive play that facilitates the subject's journey from "what is subjectively conceived of" to "what is objectively perceived."

The outcome of this investigation constitutes the production of a series of photographs describing an empty abstract space, one that is invested with a psychic dimension that produces the effect of ambiguity between its representational and abstract readings. It provides a redefinition of abstraction in a space of tension between the iconic and indexical aspects of the sign and opens up the space of abstraction in photography as one in which the relationship between inner and outer reality can be performed and can become a space of action and intervention.

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My parents who believe in me and always support me

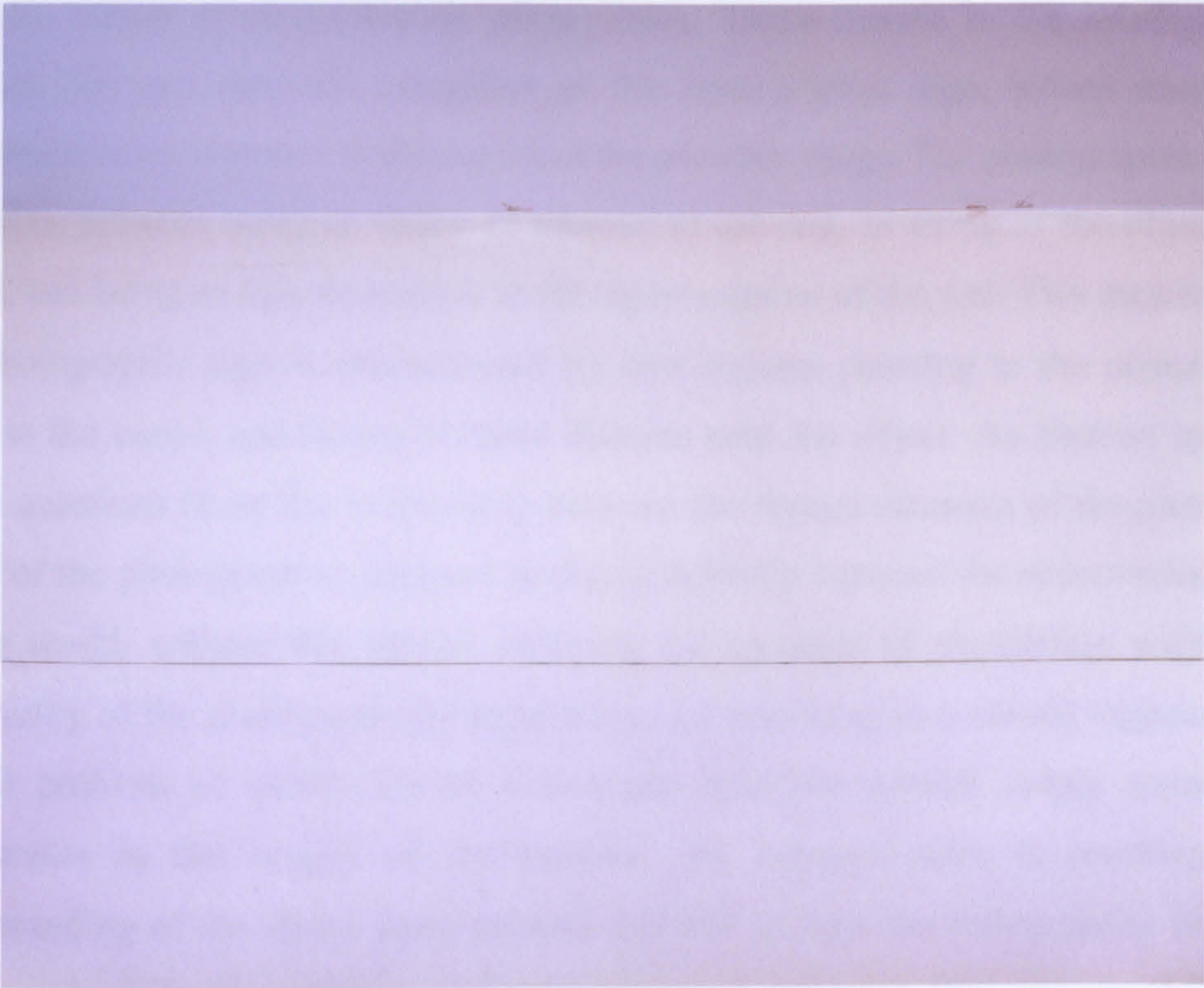
My little cousin Rodoula Georgia Skarvelaki (*in memoriam*)

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The Empty Space in Abstract Photography: A Psychoanalytical Perspective



Untitled 1, Giclée print, 80x100 cm

INTRODUCTION

In my research I seek to explore the particular theoretical problems raised by dealing with the notion of abstraction in photography. These consist in the relationship between the two semiotic categories of the photographic sign, whose status is challenged when it comes to discussion of the abstract image. The photographic sign oscillates between being an index in relation to the real, in terms of the objective world, and being an icon in relation to the representation of the real. This means that the photographic sign is characterized by two actions: pointing to the object out there in the world, and having a visual likeness with the object. An abstract image raises questions about the relationship between the formal elements of the pictorial space of the photograph as opposed to the relationship between the object-referents in the world, without this though implying the equation of abstraction with the pictoriality of the photograph. By examining and resolving, to a certain degree, the formal problem of abstraction as it emerges from the *optical, empty space of abstraction* in the images of my practice, my research aims at reaching an understanding of the above more general problem of how the referentiality of the photograph shifts its meaning when the object of reference becomes an abstract form. In my own work I have been particularly interested in the psychological aspects of the abstract image and within this context I will explore the relationship of the abstract photographic image to the inner world, and also notions of exteriority and interiority as these relate to the transition from the unconscious to conscious reality.

In developing my argument, I will open the discussion by describing the particular theoretical problems of abstraction in photography in relationship to the historical development of the abstract photographic imagery. Following this discussion I will give an introductory description of the psychoanalytic concept of *potential space*, as it is the main working notion on which my thesis is based. I will shortly explain the context, in which I use this notion to understand the problem of abstraction in photography and particularly in the visual problem of emptiness as it emerges within

my own practice. I will then discuss how the concept of abstraction in art is dealt with by distinguishing three models of abstraction:

I) Psychological models of abstraction

II) Abstraction as medium and

III) Abstraction as process II - The Deleuzian model of abstract machines

In the context of the first model and in order to explore the relationship of the abstract image to the inner world I will draw upon art theorists (Worringer, Kuspit, Stokes, Ehrenzweig) who employ a psychoanalytic vocabulary from the Kleinian theory of *Object Relations* and the Winnicottian theory of *Transitional Phenomena*. I will use these theories to discuss the notion of abstraction in relationship to a theory of the “subject” from two opposite points of view: as a pure withdrawal from the external world and as a withdrawal that results in an engagement with the objective reality. I will then examine how these two different aspects of abstraction are interpreted and theorized (by Peter Fuller and Briony Fer) in specific abstract works of visual art and sculpture that present the formal issue of emptiness as a dominant problem of abstraction which needs to be examined.

Based on the aesthetics of the abstract form in the previous model, and on its importance in defining the medium, I will move to the second model based on modernist ideas about abstraction. I will give an account of the dominant Greenbergian approach which sees the apotheosis of the object of painting as a self-contained entity. Then, I will open out this model both in terms of the “object” and “subject” by drawing upon Philip Leider’s literalist approach to abstraction and David Joselit’s more cultural/psychological position. My aim is to show the relevance of the model of abstraction as medium to the history of photographic abstraction.

I will then proceed to my third and last model of abstraction, the Deleuzian “abstract machines”, which I will link to the previous two models as a way of reading some of the issues on abstraction relating both to form and psychology. I

will link the Deleuzian concept of the abstract machines to the concept of *potential space*, and I will argue that as an aesthetic model of abstraction this potential space becomes important as an intermediate space between the internal world and external reality. In this space abstraction is generated out of a creative “play with the real” that finally bridges those two worlds in the realization and perception of the end art product.

In the chapters that follow on from the discussion of the literature around abstraction, psychoanalysis and photography, I will look at the works of two contemporary practitioners, James Welling and Uta Barth and I will demonstrate how this approach can deepen our understanding of abstraction in photography. This will lead the discussion to the description and analysis of the formal problem of emptiness in my work by positioning it within the context of the previous three models under the umbrella of the *potential space as an aesthetic model of abstraction*, thus providing a framework of concepts to understand the particular issues concerning abstraction in photography. I will then discuss my methodology and the way in which I developed my practice to produce the final photographic outcome.

CHAPTER 1: ABSTRACTION, PSYCHOANALYSIS AND PHOTOGRAPHY

1.1 INTRODUCING THE PROBLEM

Aside from man's *eternal* wish to empathize with the world he perceives, to enter into it and convey and interpret experiences, there is also an *eternal* desire to change the world and ultimately to create a new world.¹

Gottfried Jäger

With this remark in his essay “Abstract Photography (2002)”, Gottfried Jäger suggests that the above observation is also applicable to photography. Historically, the development of the photographic medium has been used both to represent the world and to interpret the world in terms of changing it by creating a new vision, a new optical reality.² The notion of abstraction is inherent in the act of taking a photograph of the world. Fundamentally, the photographic image is always in some sense a form of abstraction because it always abstracts a part of the world, a physical object or parts of it in order to place it in the frame of its composition.

Nevertheless, abstraction in photography is often considered to be inconceivable and to contradict its very essence, which is built upon the imprint of the trace of a real object on the photosensitive paper, creating a strong bond between photography and reality. This is because the notion of abstraction is perceived, as we shall later see in Wilhelm Worringer's account, as something not belonging to this world, as something transcendental and otherworldly. But as I will argue, abstraction derives from reality and it returns to reality, allowing a better understanding of the term abstract photography.

¹ Gottfried Jäger, ‘Abstract Photography (2002)’, in Ruth Horak, ed., *Rethinking Photography I+II*, Austria: Fotohof edition /Forum Stadtpark, 2003, p. 170.

² Information about the historical and ontological identity of photography can be seen in: Geoffrey Batchen, *Burning with desire: the conception of photography*, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: The MIT Press, 1997.

André Bazin, ‘The ontology of the photographic image’, *What is cinema?*, Volume 1, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004, pp. 9-16.

Regarding the emergence of photography as a theoretical object see:
Rosalind E. Krauss, ‘Reinventing the Medium’, *Critical Inquiry*, 25(2), Winter 1999, pp. 289-305.

The ultimate aim of my research is to explore and understand the particular theoretical problems raised by the notion of abstraction in relationship to photography. Specifically, my research aims at examining and resolving the formal problem of the abstract, empty, photographic space as it emerges as a key issue in my own practice, leading to an understanding of the more general problem of how the referent of photography³ as actual object shifts its meaning to become an abstract form.

But what are the theoretical problems that emerge from the paradoxical relationship of abstraction to photography? The first and most obvious question that is often brought up for consideration is whether the concept of abstraction is applicable to photography and whether abstraction and photography as concepts have anything in common. Further consideration of the relationship between these two concepts can lead to a more substantial questioning of their status. How can abstraction be defined when it relates to photography? Where is the abstract photographic image abstracted from? What is its status? These are questions that aim at exploring the role of abstraction in photography and focus mostly on the semiotics of the image and how this shifts its status when it becomes abstract.

When we consider the photograph as image the referentiality of the image is at stake. The abstract photograph challenges the relationship between the two semiotic categories of the photographic sign. The latter oscillates between being an index in relation to the real and being an icon in relation to the representation of the real. To exemplify this I will refer to the semiotic definitions of “index” and “icon” according to Charles Sanders Peirce’s semiotic scheme and I will draw upon Kaja Silverman’s interpretation of his writings. Peirce based his writings on two triads of signs. The first triad consists of the “sign”, the “interpretant”, and the “object”

³ For an account of how the object of photography is viewed see: Don Slater, ‘The Object of Photography’, in Jessica Evans, ed., *The Camerawork Essays: Context and meaning in photography*, London: Rivers Oram Press, 1997, pp. 88-118.

while the second triad consists of “icons”, “indices”, and “symbols.”⁴ I will point out here that according to Silverman, “unlike Saussure’s signifier, Peirce’s sign often either resembles or adjoins the object.”⁵ The act of signification in Peirce’s account lies on “its insistence on the existential relation of sign and object, or signifier and referent – on the connection, that is between signification and reality.”⁶

Peirce defines the *icon* and *index* as follows:

An *icon* is a sign which would possess the character which renders it significant, even though its object had no existence; such as a lead-pencil streak as representing a geometrical line. An *index* is a sign which would, at once, lose that character if there were no interpretant. Such, for instance, is a piece of mould with a bullet-hole in it as a sign of a shot; for without the shot there would have been no hole; but there is a hole there, whether anybody has the sense to attribute it to a shot or not.⁷

According to Silverman’s account ‘the iconic sign resembles its conceptual object in certain ways. It may share certain of the properties which that object possesses, or it may duplicate the principles according to which that object is organized.’⁸ The icon then can be divided into two types of signs: the “*images*” and the “*diagrams*.” The photographs, paintings, sculptures and cinematic images are the most obvious examples of iconic signs, as Silverman notes. She also observes that algebraic equations and graphs can also be iconic, as they fall into the category of the *diagrams*. On the other hand, she observes that the indexical sign exhibits an existential bond between the index and its object.

⁴See a more detailed description in Kaja Silverman, ‘From Sign to Subject, A Short History’, *The subject of semiotics*, New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983, pp. 14-25.

⁵ Ibid., p. 15.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Charles S. Peirce, ‘Sign’, in James Hoopes, ed., *Writings on Semiotic by Charles Sanders Peirce: Peirce on Signs*, Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1991, pp. 239-240.

⁸ Kaja Silverman, *The subject of semiotics*, op. cit., p.19.

Having seen these definitions we can now understand how the photographic sign can stand both as an index and as icon. It can also stand as a symbol, but as this is not one of the issues that I want to draw attention to, I will not explain it further.

The indexicality of the photographic sign pertains to an existential bond between the sign and the object-referent. The photograph points as an index to the object that exists out there in the world. Its iconicity lies in the fact that it is a representation of the object in terms of having a degree of similarity to it, it looks like it.

In the essay “Notes on the Index: Part 1” Rosalind Krauss describes masterfully these functions of the photographic sign:

Every photograph is the result of a physical imprint transferred by light reflections onto a sensitive surface. The photograph is thus a type of icon, or visual likeness, which bears an indexical relationship to its object. Its separation from true icons is felt through the absoluteness of this physical genesis, one that seems to short-circuit or disallow those processes of schematization or symbolic intervention that operate within the graphic representations of most paintings. If the Symbolic finds its way into pictorial art through the human consciousness operating behind the forms of representation, forming a connection between objects and their meaning, this is not the case for photography. Its power is an index and its meaning resides in those modes of identification which are associated with the Imaginary.⁹

The explanation of the functions of the indexical and iconic categories of the sign and specifically of the photographic sign helps us now to understand better the discussion about the abstract photograph. The abstract photograph oscillates between these two categories. It can have both an indexical relationship to the real object and an iconic one.

An abstract image raises questions about the relationship between the formal elements of the pictorial space of the photograph as opposed to the relationship

⁹Rosalind Krauss, ‘Notes on the Index: Part 1’, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: The MIT Press, 1986, p. 203.

between the object-referents in the world. Does an abstract photograph always imply the non-recognizability of the object? To what extent does it imply the collapse of the referent? And if an abstract image implies the absence of the referent, then what is the status of the abstract photographic sign? Winfried Nöth in his essay ‘‘Photography between Reference and Self-reference (2002)’’ writes:

The abstract photograph is neither a nonsign nor an empty sign. It is not an allreferential, but a self-referential sign, a sign which has its referents within itself, in a network of internal references to forms, reflections and shades of light. It is this system of internal references which makes the abstract photo a pure light composition.¹⁰

But is an abstract photograph always a self-referential photograph? The degree of representation of the photographic sign ranges between ‘‘transparency’’¹¹ and ‘‘opaqueness’’, or between ‘‘narrative’’ and ‘‘reduction’’, according to the terminology that Ruth Horak adopts.¹² Does this dualism consist of two extremes or two absolutes of the status of the photographic sign or is there a space that allows for it to obtain a more flexible status? Winfried Nöth seems to suggest that abstract photography is positioned at the extreme edge of ‘‘reduction’’, emphasizing the iconicity of the self-referential sign. Rolf H. Krauss suggests a different kind of trajectory of the photographic sign according to four steps between ‘‘narration’’ and ‘‘reduction’’. As the indexicality of the photograph is eliminated by suppressing the recognizability of the referent, its iconicity is then the most characteristic feature that plays a decisive role in the understanding of the form. The four steps that Krauss suggests refer to Otto Steinert’s steps towards perfection. These draw a parallel to the three forms that Theo Van Doesburg suggested which led him to the foundational principles of Concrete Painting. Steps one and two refer to the mimetic photographic replication and representational photographic replication respectively.

¹⁰ Winfried Nöth, ‘Photography Between Reference and Self-reference (2002)’, in Ruth Horak, ed., *Rethinking Photography I+II*, Austria: Fotohof edition, 2003, p. 28.

¹¹ On the transparency of the photographic image see also: Kendall L. Walton, ‘On pictures and Photographs: Objections Answered’, in Richard Allen, ed., *Film theory and philosophy*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997, pp. 60-75.

¹² Ruth Horak, ‘Preface’, in Ruth Horak, ed., *Rethinking Photography I+II*, Austria: Fotohof edition, 2003, p. 8.

These two steps comprise the *natural form*. The representational photographic creation as the third step comprises the *artistic form*, while the absolute photographic creation as the fourth step comprises the *spiritual form*. Rolf H. Krauss writes that the *artistic form* becomes the epithet for abstraction while the *spiritual form* becomes the representation of the concrete, or of the self-referential photographic sign, if we relate it to Nöth's account of abstraction.¹³

This leads me to consider whether there is an absolute abstraction or not and to speculate about the possible form of the abstract image. Abstraction in photography therefore presents a quite complicated problem as it challenges the conditions of the status of the photographic image.¹⁴

1.2 HISTORY OF PHOTOGRAPHIC ABSTRACTION

The first time that the term *abstraction* appeared in relation to photography, was in Alvin Langdon Coburn's 1916 article, "The Future of Pictorial Photography" in the year book *Photograms of the Year 1916*. In this essay he compared the status of photography with that of modern painting and he argued that photography needs to proceed beyond the realm of mimetic and symbolic representation and to explore new forms of photographic creations. He suggested an exhibition to take place with the title *Abstract Photography*, where photographs "in which the interest of the subject matter is greater than the appreciation of the extraordinary"¹⁵ would not be

¹³Rolf H. Krauss, 'A Small History of Concrete Photography', in Gottfried Jäger, Rolf H. Krauss and Beaté Reese, ed., *Concrete Photography/Konkrete Fotografie*, Germany, Bielefeld: Kerber Verlag, 2005,, pp. 70-71.

¹⁴ For other essays on photographic abstraction see also:
Barbara Savedoff, 'Abstract Photography: Identifying the Subject', *Exposure*, 37(2), 2004, pp. 25-34.

Paul Bergen, 'Abstract and Abstraction in Photography', *Camera*, 43(12), December 1964, pp. 32, 41.

MOMA, 'The sense of abstraction in contemporary photography', *Aperture*, 8(2), 1960, pp. 72-117.

¹⁵ Rolf H. Krauss, 'A Small History of Concrete Photography', op. cit., p. 68.

accepted. The proposed exhibition was not realized but Coburn proceeded later the same year in the production of the *Vortographs* (Figure 1), created by the use of the *vortoscope*;¹⁶ an invention of his own, which was an arrangement of mirrors that acted like a prism and split the image formed by the lens into fragments. Vortographs are photographs from objects, such as pieces of wood and crystal, but their subject has a non-realistic, non-recognizable form that stands on its own. Characteristically, in the catalogue of his one man show at the Camera Club in London in 1917, Coburn wrote:

The vortoscope freed photography from the material limitations of depicting recognisable natural objects. By its use the photographer can create beautiful arrangements of form for their own sake.¹⁷



Figure 1
Alvin Langdon Coburn, *Vortographs*, 1917

Following Coburn's statement, Gottfried Jäger adds more than eighty years later, that vortographs "are pure photo compositions", they "have an aesthetic quality of their own and are not imitations of painting."¹⁸

¹⁶ Verity Andrews, 'A.L. Coburn and E.O Hoppé, Photographs of artists 1912-1923', *Reading University Library Archives* [online], 2005, [Accessed: 13 September 2007], Available at: <http://www.reading.ac.uk/web/FILES/library/featurecoburn.pdf>

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Gottfried Jäger, 'Abstract Photography (2002)', op. cit., p. 172.

Although vortographs belong to the category of camera photographs, since the vortoscope was attached to the camera, they are often thought to be cameraless images. The first abstract camera photograph to carry the term abstraction in its title is by Paul Strand in the same year, 1916. The full title of that photograph is *Abstraction, Bowl, Twin Lakes, Connecticut, 1916* (Figure 2).

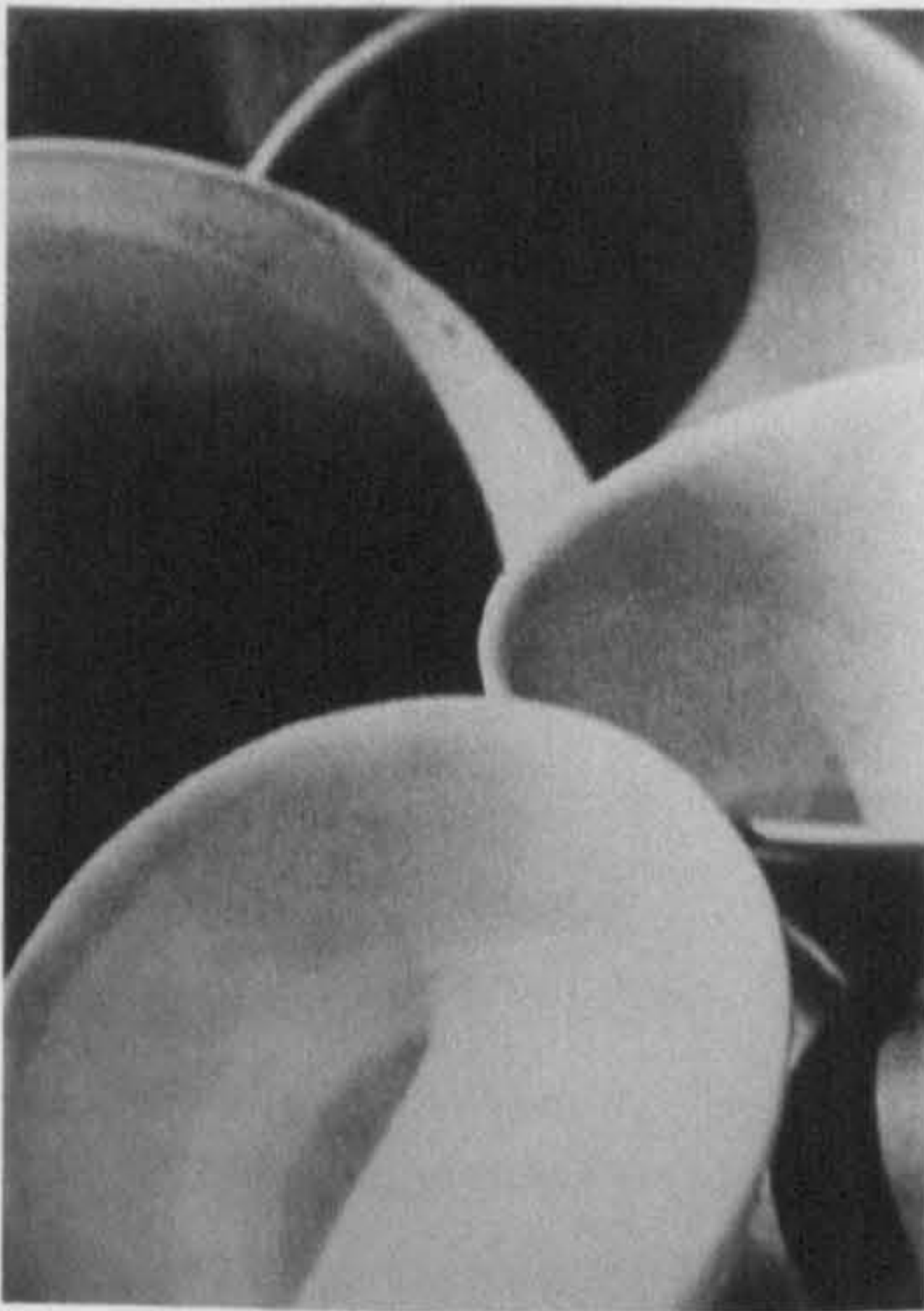


Figure 2
Paul Strand, *Abstraction, Bowl, Twin Lakes, Connecticut, 1916*

Following this, a huge diversity of experiments in abstract photography followed, including both lens and cameraless photographic explorations. Examples of these include the German Dada painter Christian Schad's *Schadographs* (Figure 3, 4) as Schad's photograms were called by the Dadaist poet Tristan Tzara from 1919. These were pieces of fabric and paper arranged in abstract compositions on photosensitive paper exposed to light.¹⁹

¹⁹ Arthur C. Danto, 'Sex and the City : The Erotic Dreamworld of Christian Schad', *The Nation* [online], May 22, 2003 (June 9, 2003 issue), [Accessed: 14 November 2006], Available at: <http://www.thenation.com/docprem.mhtml?i=20030609&s=danto>

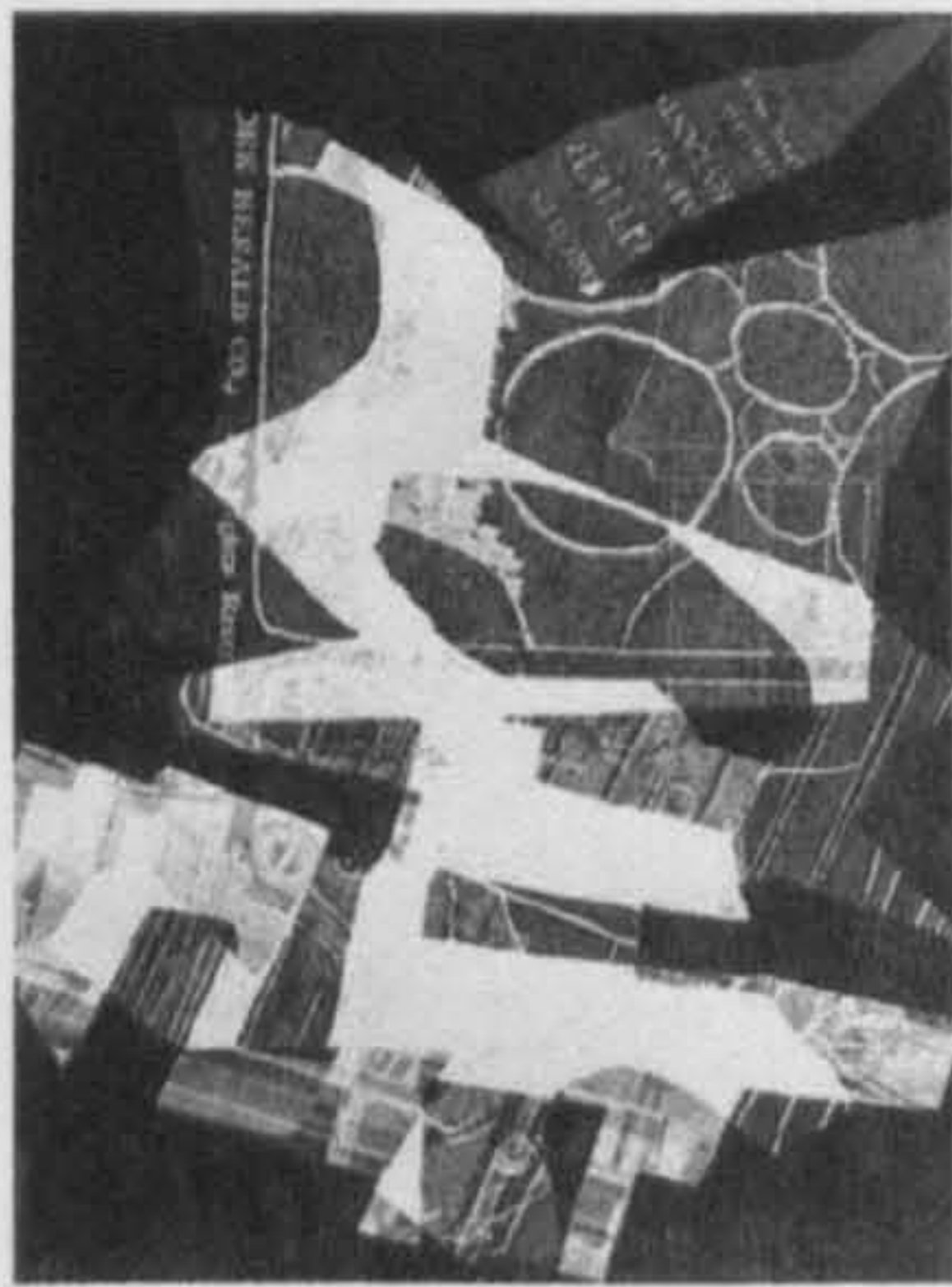


Figure 3
Christian Schad,
Schadografia No. 2, 1919



Figure 4
Christian Schad,
Schadografia No. 14, 1919

Man Ray's Rayograms followed, as well as the photograms, photomontages, photo-collages, photo-sculptures by Laszlo Moholy-Nagy (Figure 5) and El Lissitzky, who developed them more in the context of Bauhaus until 1933, and later, after 1938, at New Bauhaus in Chicago.²⁰ Another significant stage is the abstract photography of the movements of New Objectivity in Europe²¹ and America, with Alexander Rodchenko, Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, Albert Renger-Patzsch, Karl Blossfeldt, Germaine Krull, Josef Sudek, Jaromir Funke, Frantisek Drtikol, Walker Evans and Edward Weston (Figure 6, 7) being the most important names in that category. New Photography was aiming at showing people a new way of looking at the modern world by using strategies such as close ups, high and low-angle shots, cropping strategies, and perfectly printed images from the technical point of view.²²

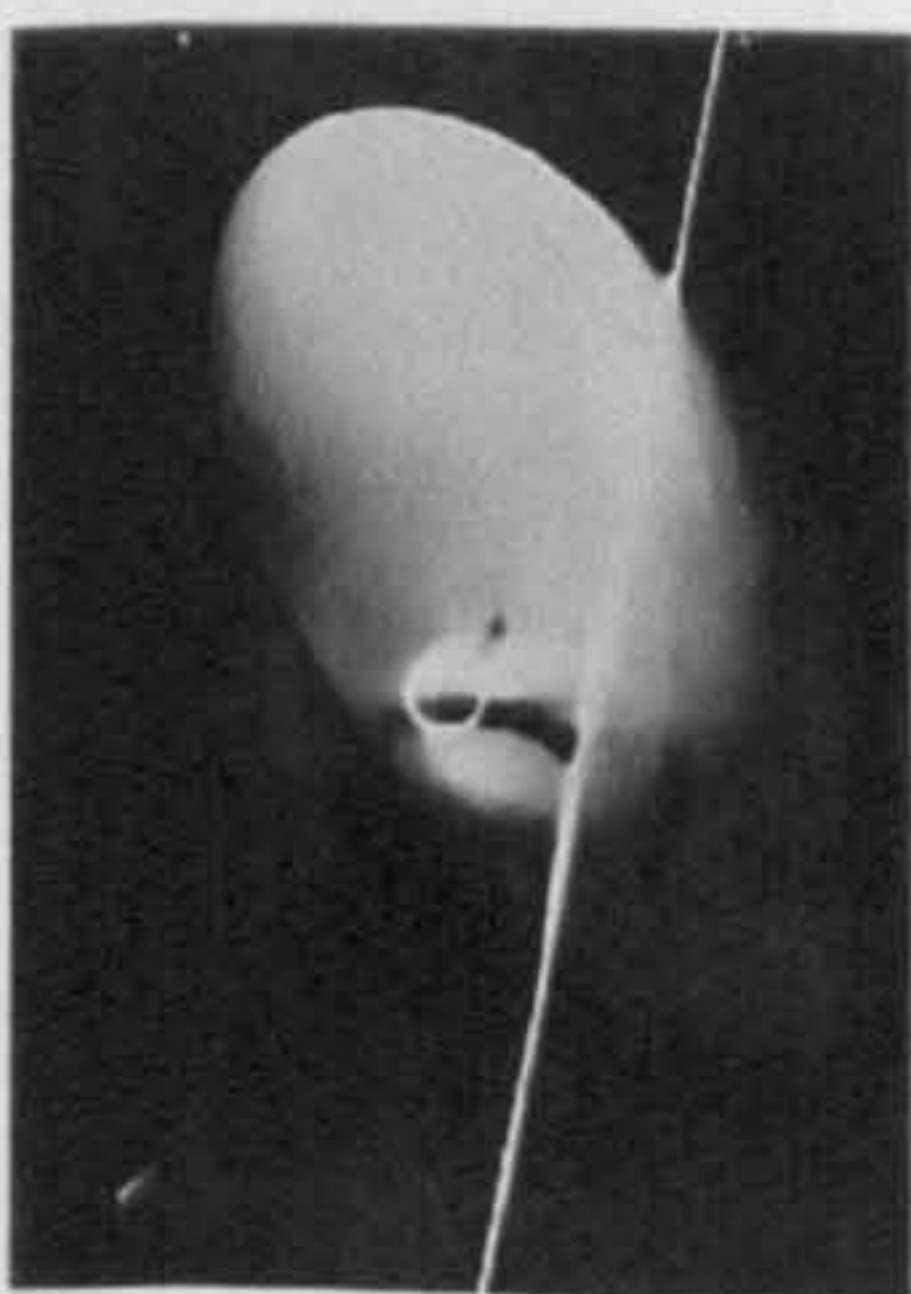


Figure 5
László Moholy-Nagy,
Photogram No. II, 1925
Silver gelatin print (enlargement after 1922 photogram), 955 x 685 mm
Berinson, Berlin/ Ubu Gallery, New York

²⁰ Gottfried Jäger, 'Abstract Photography (2002)', op. cit., p. 174.

²¹ See also: David Mellor, ed., *Germany the new photography 1927-33*, Arts Council of Great Britain, 1978.

²² See also: Liz Wells, 'The modern era', in Liz Wells, ed., *Photography: a critical introduction*, London and New York: Routledge, 2004, pp. 259-273.

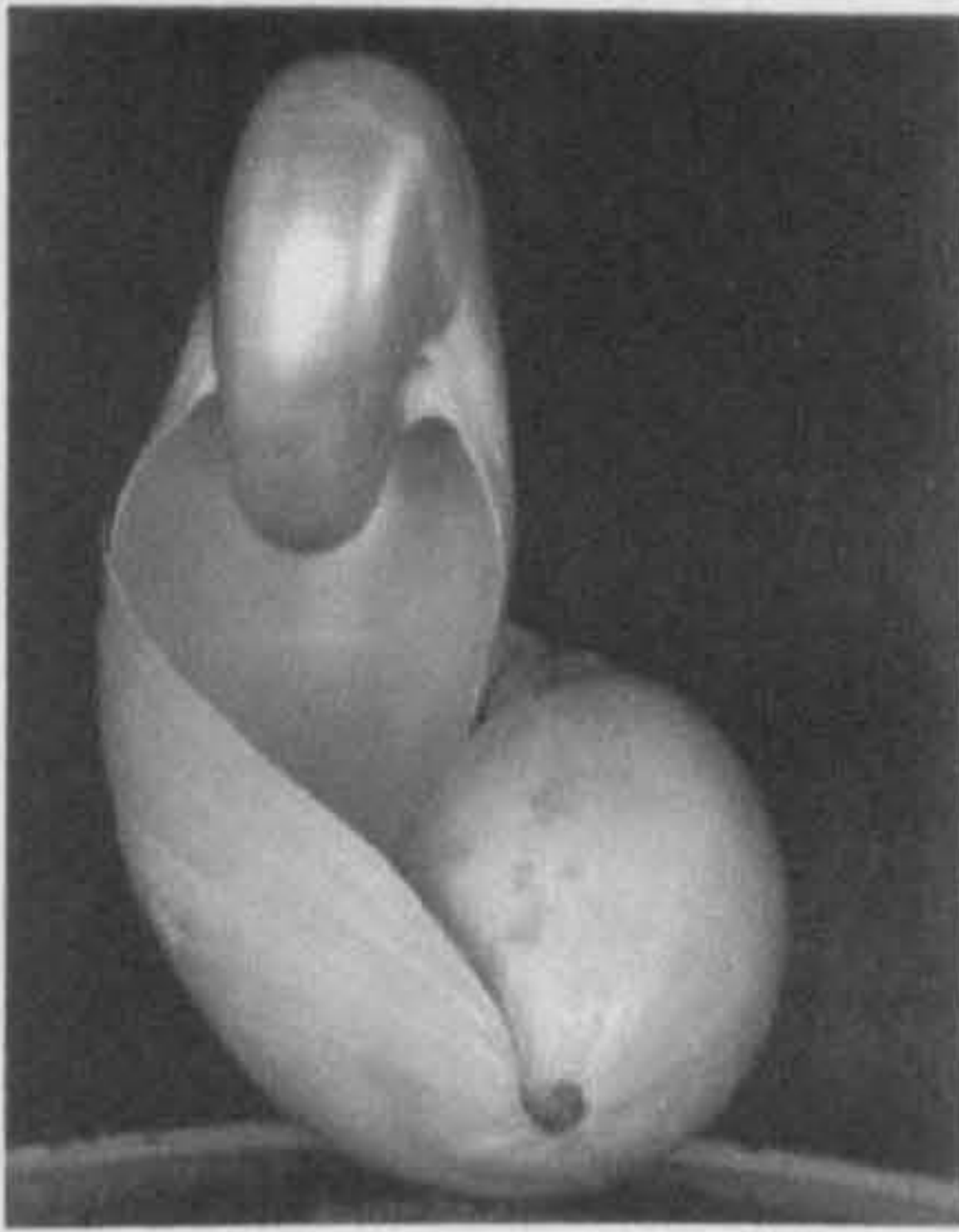


Figure 6
Edward Weston,
Shells, 1927



Figure 7
Jaromir Funke,
Abstract Photograph, 1928-1929

The transformation of the object and the creation and presentation of a new reality was at the core of all the abstract techniques that were applied in order to achieve the desired result. As Thomas Jansen notes about some specific cropped images by Albert Renger-Patzsch, the photographer uses “formalistic and compositional means to serve the portrayal”²³ of his subject, as well as “the interplay of objective and planimetric abstraction”²⁴ in his cropping techniques in order to enhance a “particular appeal”²⁵ of the object by emphasizing the emergence of its formal possibilities.

For these photographers, photographic abstraction was a way of drawing attention to and clarifying the objectivity of the external world. The mechanical apparatus revealed its purity and otherness in the creation of clear photographic forms that celebrate the hidden beauty and significance of their referential objects. In contrast with this, the American school of abstractionists influenced by Stieglitz explored the metaphorical suggestive possibilities of photographic abstraction as a means for expressing subjective feelings and projecting these into the world.

²³ Thomas Jansen, ‘Albert Renger-Patzsch’s Early Work: Object and Abstraction’, *History of Photography*, 21(3), Autumn 1997, p. 184.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 183.

Alfred Stieglitz was a distinguished figure among the American group of photographers of New Objectivity who is worthwhile citing as a separate case since he influenced a number of photographers who showed a remarkable excellence in their practice, especially in the years following the Second World War. His series of photographs, entitled *Equivalents* (Figure 8, 9), that were created during the decade of the 1920s, suggest a subjective vision of photography's capability to express something other than what it literally represents. Stieglitz cherished "a respect for the spiritual purity of art."²⁶ His photographs of clouds as "equivalents of my most profound life experience, my basic philosophy of life"²⁷ demonstrate this kind of respect. His interest in "the convergence between the plastic arts and music" was expressed in those series as a search "for visual shapes that could communicate mood directly, as musical tones do."²⁹



Figure 8
Alfred Stieglitz, *Equivalent*,
Set A, No. 1, 1929

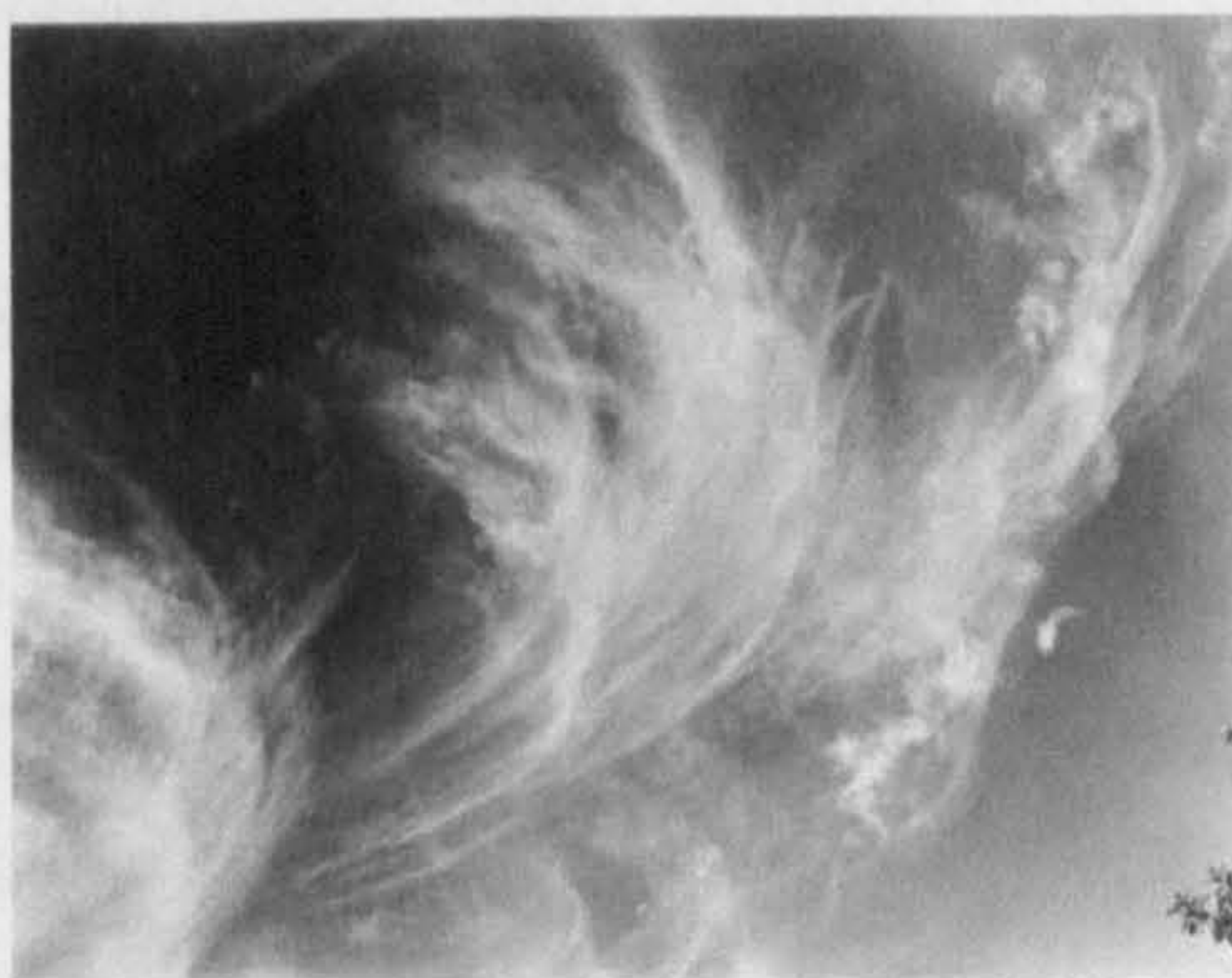


Figure 9
Alfred Stieglitz, *Equivalent*, 1930

²⁶ Shelley Rice, 'Beyond Reality: The subjective vision', in Michel Frizot, ed., *The New History of Photography*, Köln: Könemann, 1998, p. 661.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 662.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

Minor White, following the steps of Alfred Stieglitz and motivated by a strong interest in psychology, introduced the notion of “expressive photography” and the “reading of photograph.”³⁰ With his teaching he influenced a great number of students in the decades of the 1950s and 1960s and taught them how to read the photographs in order to extract a richer meaning from them. His work was based on Stieglitz’s ideas that “darkness and light, objects and spaces, carry spiritual as well as material meanings.”³¹ His photographs (Figure 10), are both representational and compositionally abstract at the same time, and suggest a strategy by which the camera can be seen as “revealing one’s personal feeling as symbolized by objects in the real world.”³²

Working in a similar manner to Minor White’s photographic vision of the world, but with a less spiritual attitude, Aaron Siskind is one of the few photographers whose abstract work is referenced alongside other artists’ works in publications about the history of abstract art. The reason for this is that Siskind’s photographs (Figure 11) of walls and other surfaces, taken from such an angle so as to remove the main subject from its original context, are often likened to abstract expressionist paintings such as those of Pollock, Rothko and Franz Kline.³³ Seeing his photographs from this perspective, Mary Bergstein remarks that “Siskind’s work fulfilled a promise of abstract expressionist formalism in photography”³⁴ in the same way that Hollis Frampton observes Edward Weston did by “validating the modernist system in resembling monochromatic reproductions of abstract paintings.”³⁵

³⁰ Peter C. Bunnell, ‘Minor White and photographic education’, in Michel Frizot, ed., *The New History of Photography*, Köln: Könemann, 1998, p. 664.

³¹ Shelley Rice, ‘Beyond Reality: The subjective vision’, op. cit., p. 663.

³² Peter C. Bunnell, op. cit., p. 664.

³³ Mary Bergstein, ‘Evidences’ Again: Aaron Siskind and the Modernist Documentation of Art’, *Visual Resources*, Vol. 11, 1995, p. 123.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid., Hollis Frampton’s observation can be seen in the article by Mary Bergstein.

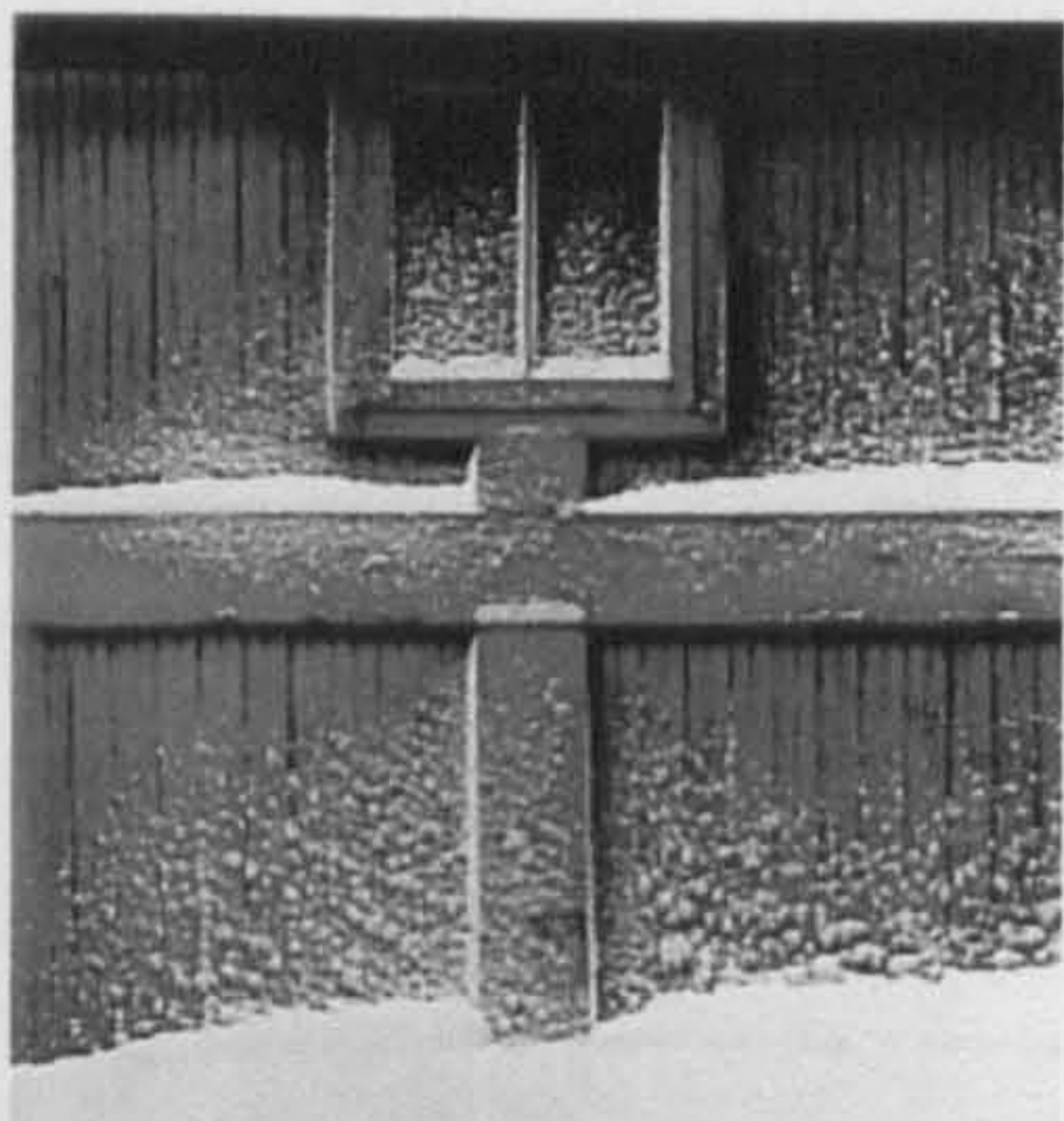


Figure 10
Minor White,
Snow on Garage Door,
Rochester, New York, 1960

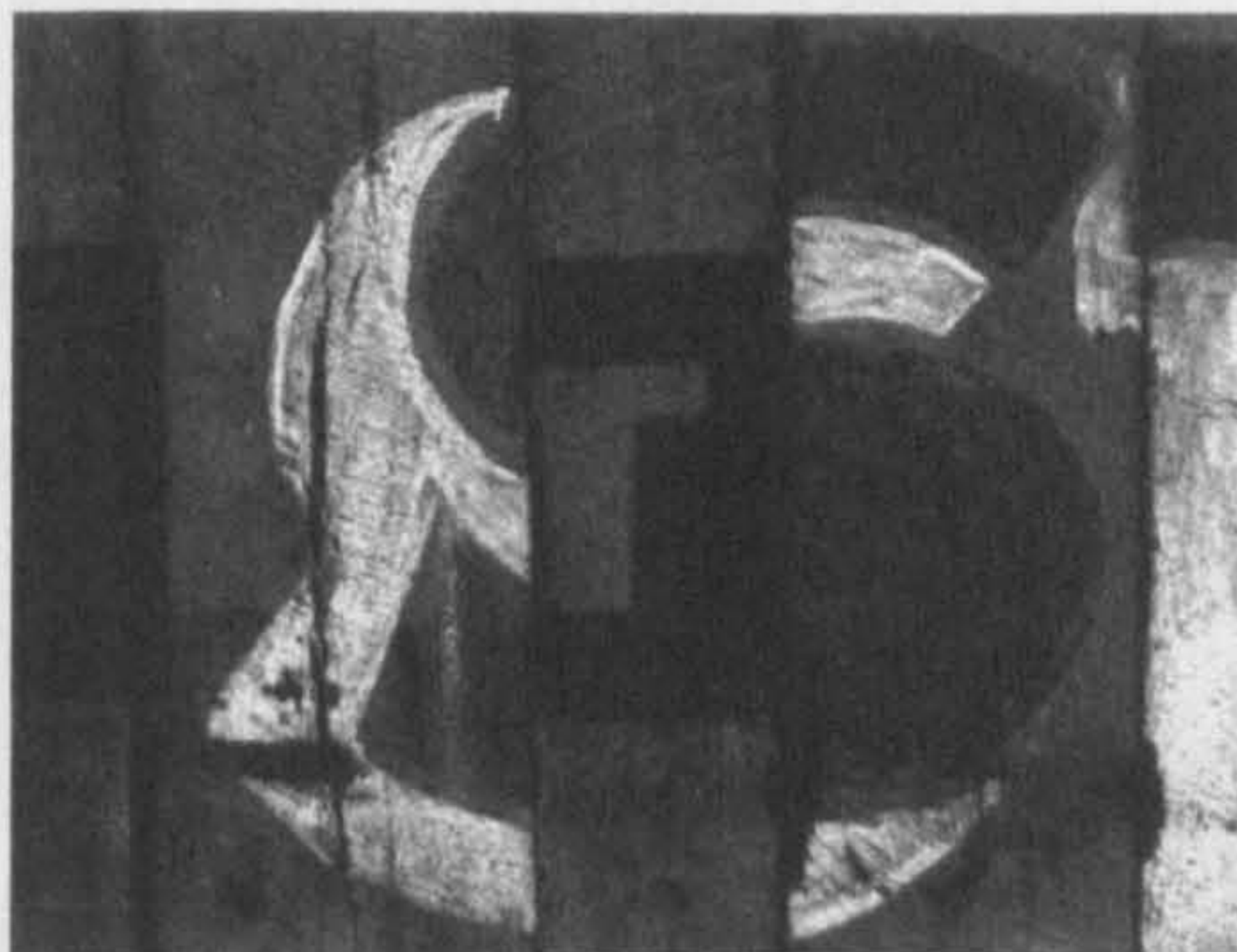


Figure 11
Aaron Siskind,
Kentucky 5, 1951

Otto Steinert developed the movement of *Subjective Photography* in the 1950s, promoting the “creative personality of photography”³⁶ with images from “every domain of personal photographic creation, from the abstract photogram to photo-reportage.”³⁷ Thus, he made use of all the discoveries of photography of the 1920s including the techniques for producing scientific images like microphotographs or astronomical images, whose results made visible structures that were not able to be observed with a naked eye. Although such kinds of images are indexical, as they are traces of existing but invisible to the eye structures, they are perceived as abstract compositions because they do not look like anything recognizable. Especially with his use of cameraless photography, (Figure 12, 13) Steinert moved towards the “perfect photographic creation.”³⁸ He wrote:

While representational creation transposes the natural form photographically, the object is still present, absolute photographic creation, in its freest form eliminates objective representation, dematerializing or abstracting the object to such an extent that it only becomes a formal element and a fundamental basis of the composition.³⁹

³⁶ Shelley Rice, ‘Beyond Reality: The subjective vision’, op. cit., p. 669.

Rice has extracted this quote from Otto Steinert’s introduction in the exhibition catalogue, *Subjective Fotografie*, 1951.

³⁷ Jean-Claude Gautrand, ‘Subjective Fotografie’, in Michel Frizot, ed., *The New History of Photography*, Köln: Könemann, 1998, p. 672.

³⁸ Rolf H. Krauss, ‘A Small History of Concrete Photography’, op. cit., p. 70.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 71.

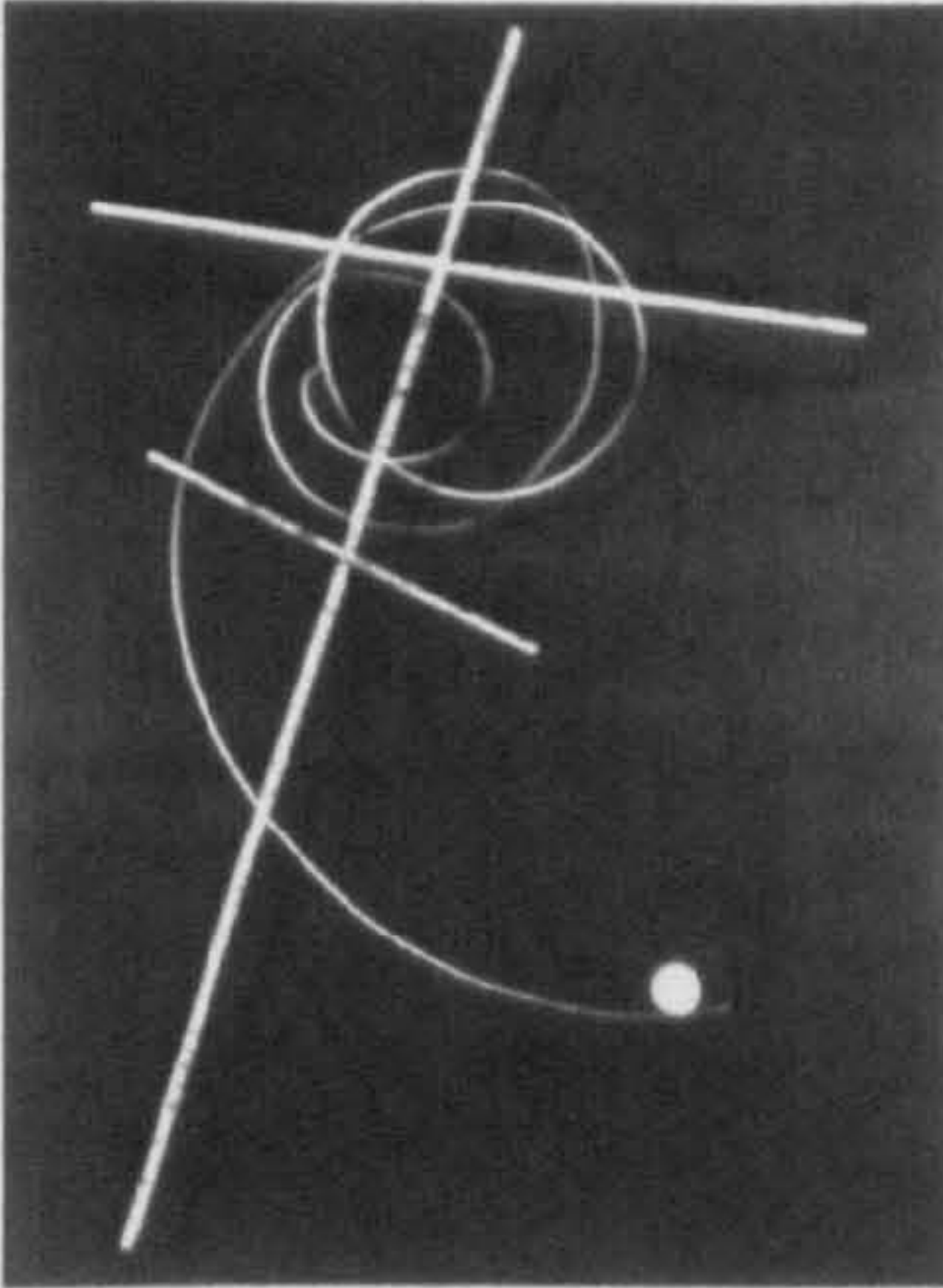


Figure 12
Otto Steinert,
Verspieler Punkt, 1948
Photogram, Gelatin silver print,
39.5x30.1 cm

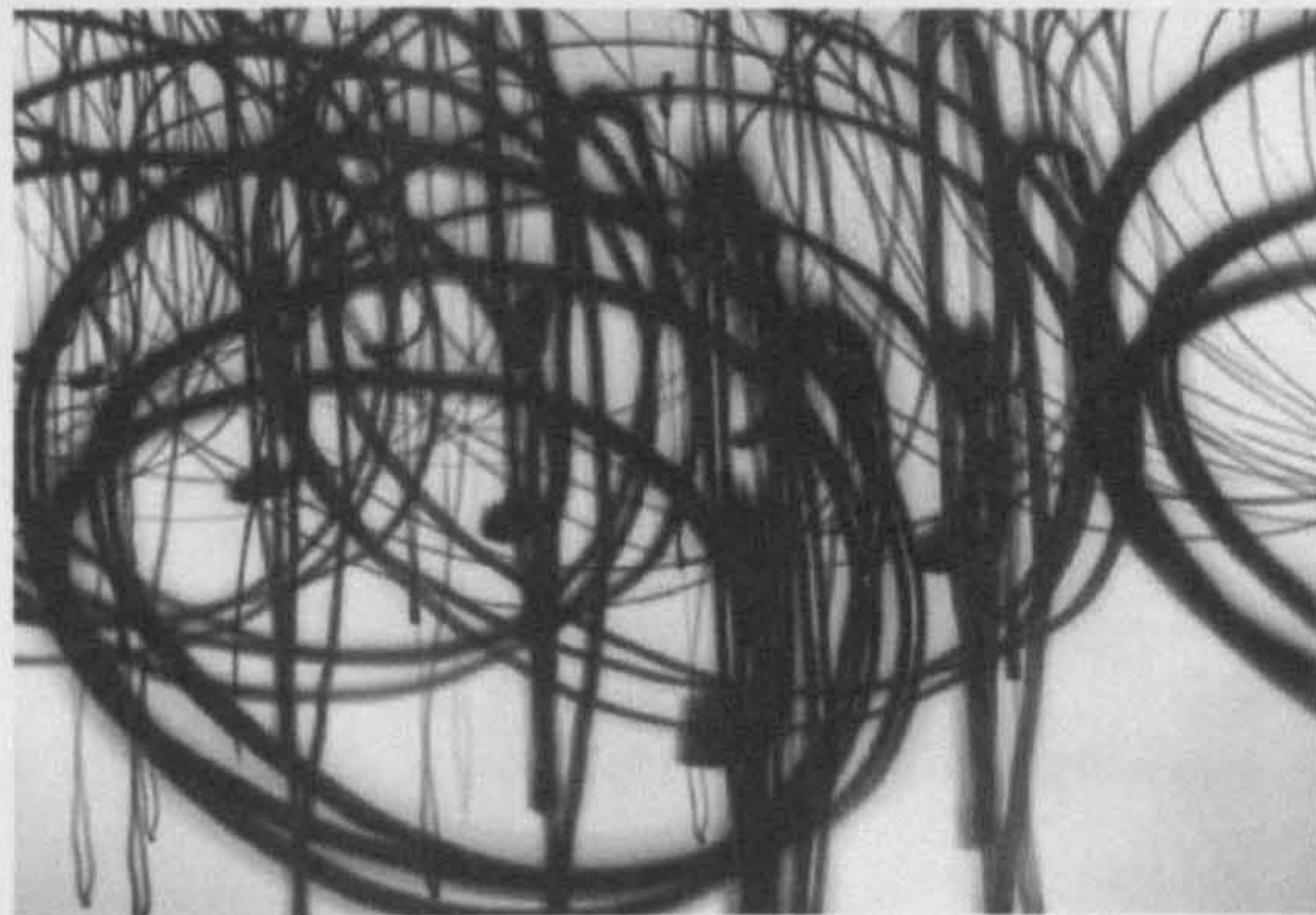


Figure 13
Otto Steinert,
Lamps at the Place de la Concorde, 1952

Otto Steinert's importance in the course of the historical development of photographic abstraction lies mostly on his interest in photograms and other abstract images made mainly without a camera. These are early examples of concrete photographs, of self-reflexive photographs. As we shall see later in the chapter in Gottfried Jäger's description of Concrete Photography, such photographs are "presented" rather than "represented". They are presented as objects rather than as photographs that can provide a window view to the world. Such photographs suppress the mimetic representation of reality although they are still indexical as being traces of light. However, this light does not come from an object-referent that exists out there in the world but possibly from an enlarger in a darkroom, which guides artificial light rays through objects on a photosensitive paper. This is a self-reflexive process because it refers to the photographic system itself. The photograms produced in this way are seen mostly as objects that present similarities to the process of painting, as they are surfaces, which have been painted with light strokes.

In this respect, *Subjective Photography*, with a “top priority to make concrete use of all photographic possibilities”⁴⁰, and a particular focus on cameraless abstract images, heralded the development of Generative photography in the 1960s. In this context the images are produced by a combination of techniques that “accentuate the use of apparatuses and introduce the principles of series and chance.”⁴¹ Thus, according to Gottfried Jäger, generative photography “articulates the idea of artistic constructivism onto which has been grafted the numerical programming of apparative systems.”⁴² This idea evidently links to the world of computers and digitally created structure images. Generative photographs (Figure 14, 15) have a very distinctive aesthetics that approaches the decorative style but without reducing the meaning of their production concept. Jäger notes that they “offered a new and contrasting concrete photographic language liberated from the restraints of realism and symbolism.”⁴³

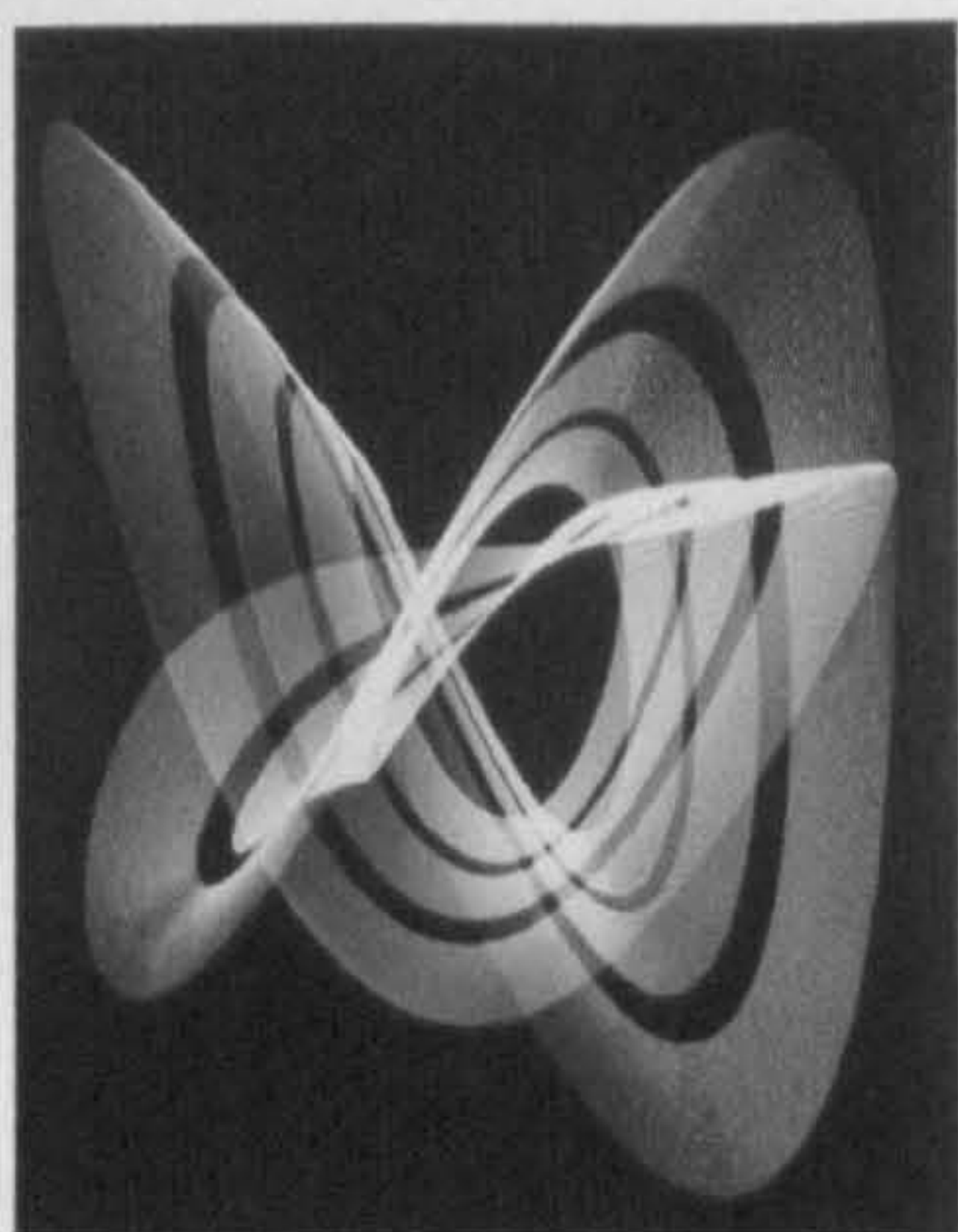


Figure 14
Heinrich Heidersberger,
Triplum, 1955,
Rhythmogram # 3782/185
Gelatin silver vintage print,
102x80 cm

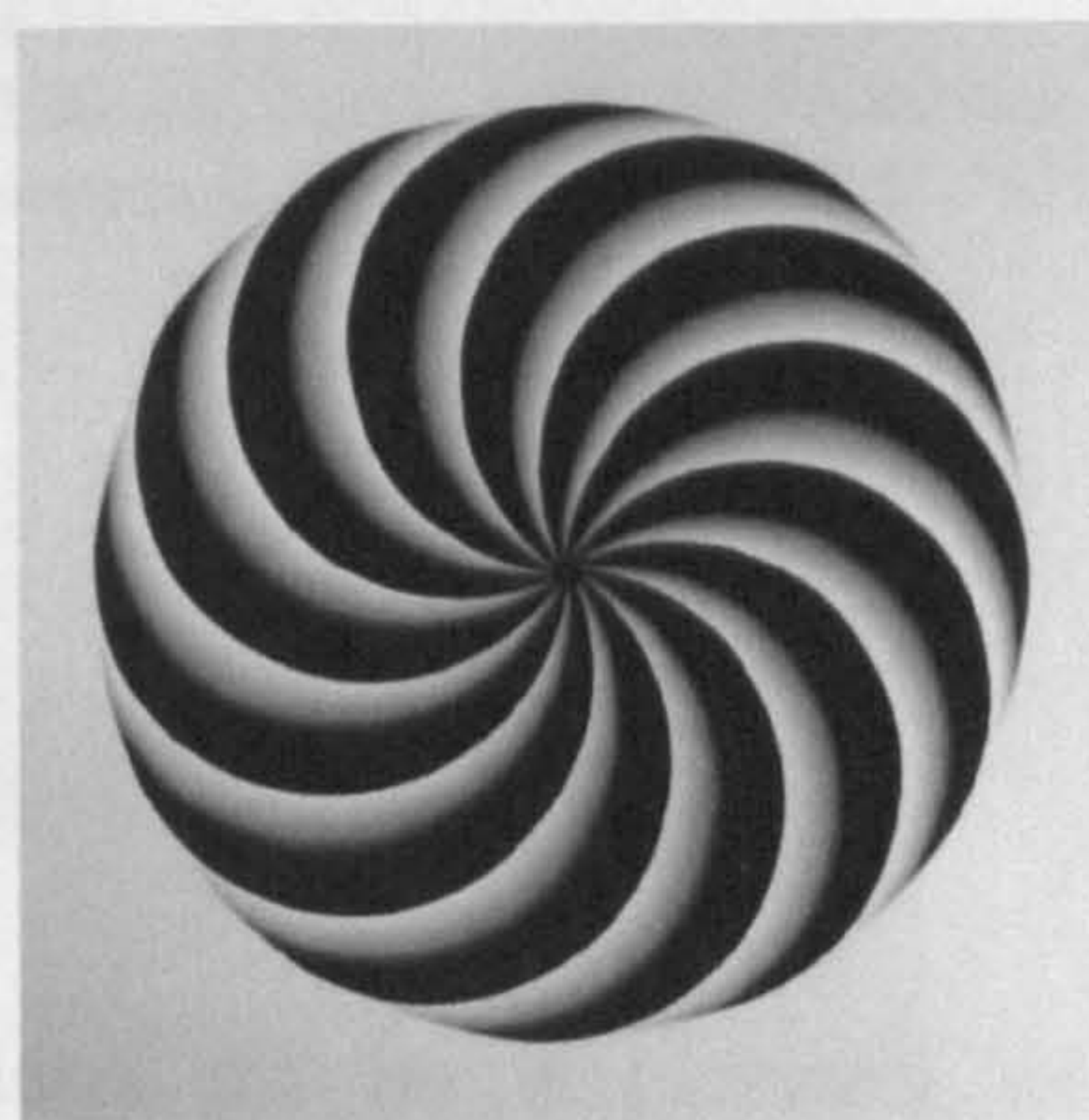


Figure 15
Hein Gravenhorst,
Mondelement, 1966,
Photomechanical Transformation
Unique gelatin silver print,
49.7x49.7 cm

Generative photography and the conceptual photography that followed in the 1970s constitute forms of Concrete Photography, which as Rolf Krauss notes, was “an

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 72.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 76.

⁴² Gottfried Jäger, ‘Concrete Photography’, in Gottfried Jäger, Rolf H. Krauss and Beate Reese, ed., *Concrete Photography/Konkrete Fotografie*, Germany, Bielefeld: Kerber Verlag, 2005, p. 25.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 24.

output of the photographic community”⁴⁴ but was based on two external influences derived from the art world. Those were the fundamental principles of the cameraless photography introduced largely through the theoretical approach of Moholy-Nagy, and the analytical and more playful approach to the photographic medium introduced by the conceptual artists in the 1960s/1970s. Conceptual artists⁴⁵ made use of photography in a free, unobstructed manner, liberated from its historical and theoretical restrictions and used as an independent artistic medium. Photography itself became the object of exploration, as in the case of the artists John Hilliard and Jan Dibbets (Figure 16), who followed an analytical programme to produce pictorial forms.⁴⁶

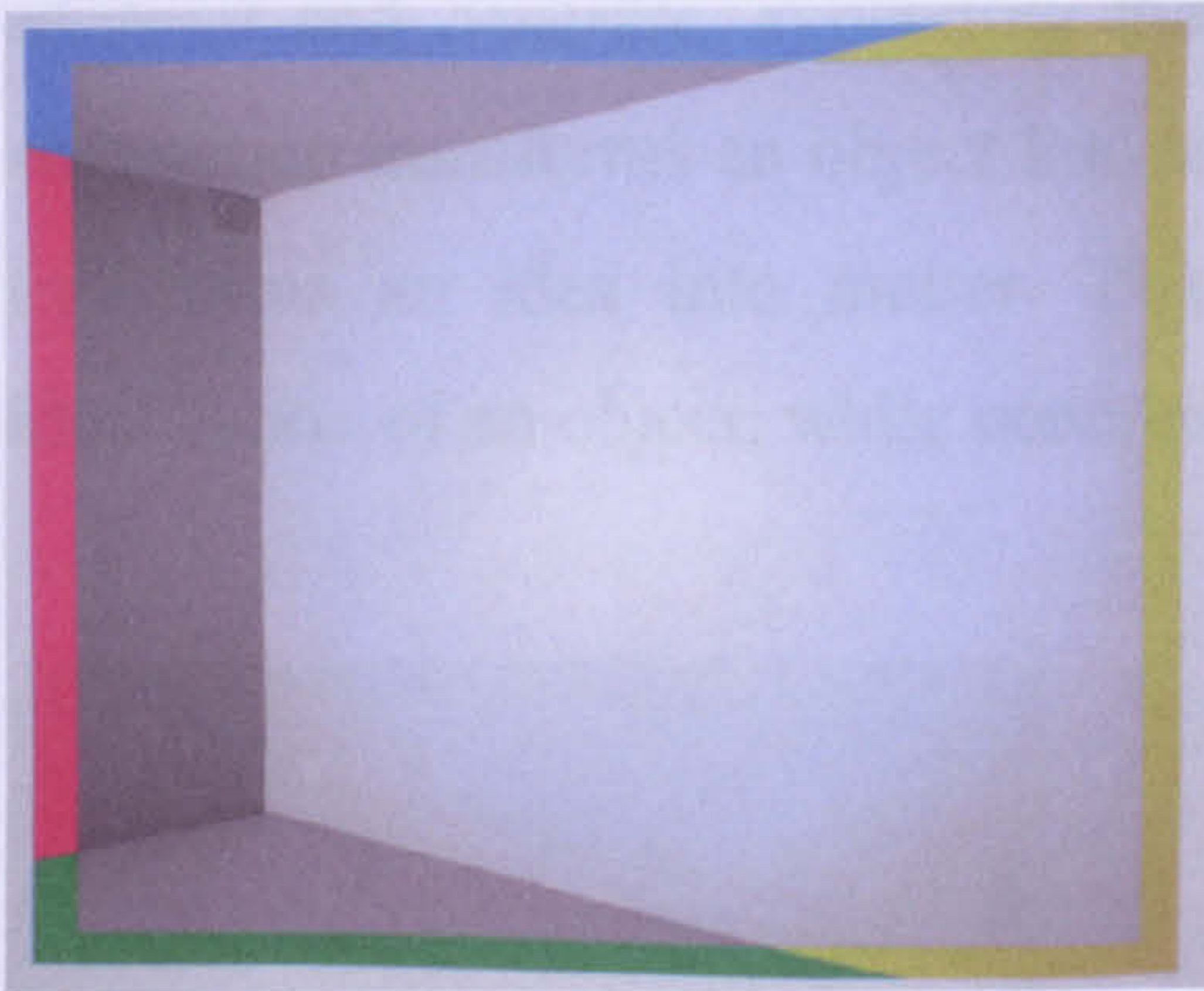


Figure 16
John Hilliard, *Large Study for Panchromatic*, 2000
Photomontage on museum board, 54.7x70 cm

Although concrete photography is considered to be a category of abstract photography in its most extreme form, it does not produce photographs that are abstractions of the world, but rather it creates aesthetic objects (Figure 17, 18, 19, 20). Gottfried Jäger writes:

⁴⁴ Rolf H. Krauss, 'A Small History of Concrete Photography', op. cit., p. 73.

⁴⁵ See also:

David Green, 'Between object and Image', *Creative Camera*, No. 340, June/July 1996, pp. 8-13.

Christina Barton, 'Traces and Boundaries: the photographic legacy of post-object art', in *Image and Text* [online], 2000, [Accessed: 12 November 2003], Available at:
<http://www.imageandtext.org.nz/tina.html>

⁴⁶ Rolf H. Krauss, 'A Small History of Concrete Photography', op. cit., p. 74.

Concrete Photography is nothing but an autonomous, auto-dynamic, self-referential and self-reflexive art – in other words, an art totally absorbed with itself, a genre which incorporates numbers, rules and systems just as much as gesture, spontaneity and chance.⁴⁷ Its works are pure photography: not abstractions of the real world, but rather concretions of the pictorial possibilities contained within photography....Concrete photographs are not a semantic medium, but aesthetic objects; they are not represented, but presented, not reproduced, but produced. They are objects made of photographic material. They do not want to illustrate anything; they do not want to represent anything. They are nothing but themselves; they are independent, authentic, autonomous, autogenic: photographs of photography.⁴⁸

It is worthwhile noticing here that Jäger makes a distinction between the notions *abstract* and *concrete*, explaining that they have quite opposite functions. While abstraction transforms an object into an idea, into something intellectual, concretion transforms an idea into matter. Thus, abstraction in photography is about the idealization of an object, while concretion is about the objectification of an idea.⁴⁹

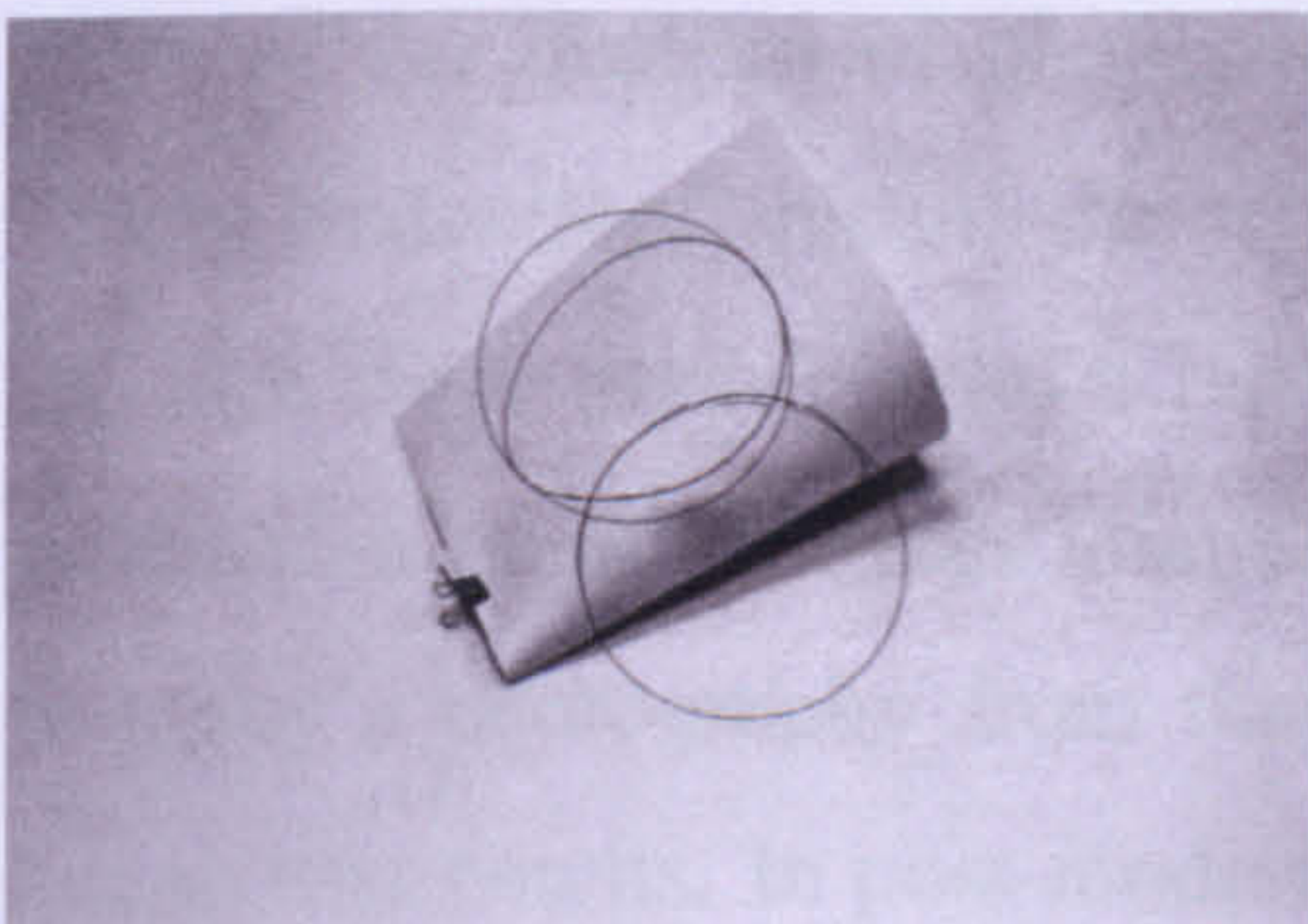


Figure 17
Kazuyo Kinoshita, '77-E, 1977 (E)
Color felt-pen on gelatin silver paper, 72x102 cm



Figure 18
Kazuyo Kinoshita, '78-8, 1978 (E)
Color felt-pen on gelatin silver paper, 61.4x89 cm

⁴⁷ Gottfried Jäger, 'Concrete Photography', op. cit., p. 24.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 15.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 19.



Figure 19
Gottfried Jäger,
no Title
Photo paper work # IV, 1996
Gelatin silver unique, 30,5 x 24 cm



Figure 20
Gottfried Jäger,
Rest
Photo paper work # III, 1998,
Gelatin silver unique distance frame,
50 x 50 cm,

Concrete photography is sometimes also referred to as “Reductionist” photography with reference to the terminology adopted by Ruth Horak to describe one of the two poles of the dualism of photography in her 2003 essay. According to Horak, this “New Reduction” means the creation of autonomous and independent images that are free from photography’s reproductive function. Rolf H. Krauss notes that the production of autonomous images is not a new idea and suggests that the difference of today’s photography from that of previous decades is that “today it is only the image that counts. In post-modern works of art, the “what” is more important than the “how”.”⁵⁰ In this sense, she brings a modernist dimension to the interpretation of postmodern works because by drawing upon Greenberg⁵¹ she suggests that “photography can also be reduced to its inherent principles.”⁵² She prefers to speak of:

⁵⁰ Rolf H. Krauss, ‘A Small History of Concrete Photography’, op. cit., p. 75.

⁵¹ Ibid..

Rolf H. Krauss is referencing Greenberg’s ideas that “every type of art determines its very own effects through its method and through its work” from Clement Greenberg, ‘Modernist Painting’, *Voice of America Forum Lectures*, 1960.

⁵² Ibid.

...An existential or absolute type of photography, of a situation wherein the medium is applied existentially, namely in its original form, using the very parameters which engender it. Concrete Photography has thereby caught up with Concrete Painting. For non-figurative photographic images are just as commonplace in the art scene today as non-figurative painted ones. An abstract image on the wall of a museum or gallery receives meaning through its sheer existence, not through its mode of execution.⁵³

I would like to take a slightly different position and suggest that our understanding of abstraction in photography is very much dependant on the “how”. How can we appreciate photographs by James Welling,⁵⁴ such as the series *New Abstractions 1998-2000*⁵⁵ (Figure 21), if we are not aware of the process that he followed to make them? If it is only the image that counts then this is definitely true, for abstract paintings represent nothing but themselves, but when the discussion is about photography, our readings of it become more complicated. Our whole perception of the function of photography’s attachment to reality does not allow us to contemplate it as having such freedom in its abstract photographic form. Having realized in the above Welling example that what we are looking at is a photograph, we instinctively seek to explore how those black and white forms have been created and where they derive from. This is the question that the notion of abstraction in photography immediately raises in each viewer and of course it is the problem that my thesis is dealing with.

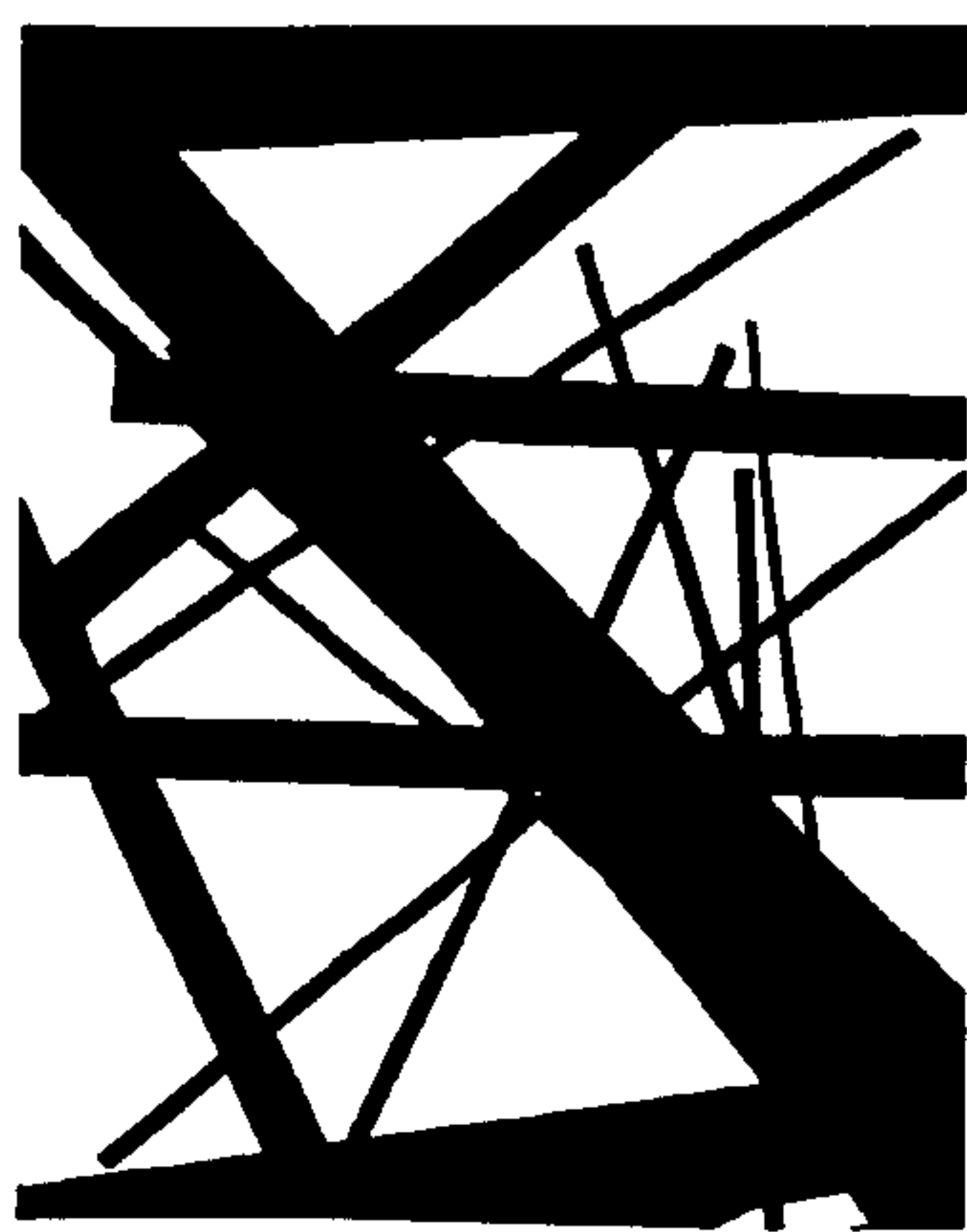


Figure 21
James Welling, 21,
New Abstractions, 1998-2000

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ A more detailed description and analysis of his photographic works follows in a later chapter.

⁵⁵ Description about the three-part process of the making of this series can be found in: David Joselit, ‘Surface Histories: The Photography of James Welling’, *Art in America*, 89(5), May 2001, p. 141.

Gottfried Jäger, in the publication *Concrete Photography*, has suggested a semiotic categorization of the most important genres of photography. He distinguishes between four reasons/motivations for producing images according to the degree by which they refer to or manipulate reality. These are: i) appropriating outer reality, ii) conveying inner reality, iii) creating new reality and iv) reflecting media reality. Similarly, in his essay “Abstract Photography (2002)” he attempts a typology of photographic abstractions based on three divisions that include i) the abstraction of the visible, ii) the visualization of the invisible and iii) the concretization of pure visibility. According to Jäger, the first category pertains to a pictorial and mimetic representation of the visible, which aims at producing images that promote the “creative vision” with the employment of experimental methods, such as “close-ups, tone separation, reversal of tonal, blurring, multiple exposure, manipulation of layers.”⁵⁶ The second category refers to photographs that present images of non-recognizable objects due to their microscopic nature, which appears invisible to the human eye. Despite the fact of their indexical nature, such images appear abstract to the eye because they do not present any visual likeness with any recognizable objects. Examples of such photographs, which are created with pictorial photographic methods, include x-ray and thermo-photography, high frequency cinematography and other kinds of photography used mostly for scientific purposes. The last category of Jäger’s categorization includes photographs, which, as he writes, “are created in a freely compositional way of dealing with photographic material, thus developing a self-referential, reflexive, poetic image language of their own. Their means become the object, resulting in image structures...They are expressed in the pure light image, in the photogram, luminogram, chemigram.”⁵⁷ These three principles underpin my practice.

As I have indicated, the history of the developments of abstract photography shows that the motivations that have prompted the artists and photographers to create abstract images vary according to historical period. It is important to see these in the

⁵⁶ Gottfried Jäger, ‘Abstract Photography (2002)’, op.cit., p. 182.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

context of more general theories of abstract art. I will outline three approaches to theorizing abstraction and identify the main explanations given for a turn to abstraction. I will consider how the theory of abstraction is related to a theory of the subject regarding the psychological issues and psychic structures that are reflected in the practice of abstraction. Thus, I will explore the link between abstraction and the inner world that will lead to a better understanding of my research problem. The three models are:

I) Psychological models of abstraction

II) Abstraction as medium and

III) Abstraction as process II - The Deleuzian model of abstract machines

It is clear from what I have argued above that the concept of abstraction in photography is situated in an uneasy territory that negotiates not only the status of the photographic sign between the iconic and the indexical, but also between the objective world and the subjective expression of it. The question posed by my own practice is how we can frame the photographic abstraction as a form of practice that can be both objectivist and material on the one hand, and express a psychological subjective experience on the other. The tension between these two positions has been central to discussion about abstraction in general and an examination of some of the different theoretical models offered to deal with this will throw light on the investigation of my research problem and help situate my practice accordingly. I will examine the particular formal problem of abstraction as this emerges in my research project, which negotiates an abstract photographic space of emptiness as a potential space of abstraction between a psychic space of subjective projection and an objective material space of aesthetic contemplation. The notion of the *empty space of abstraction* in relationship to the transition from the unconscious to conscious reality is central in my practice and this will be the focus of my investigation as I will attempt to link my theoretical discussions around abstraction to the understanding of this formal problem. The results of this investigation will provide me with a new framework of ideas and concepts with which to contribute to the

general discourse around abstraction in photography, raise new questions and open the space of discussion to further explorations.

1.3 A SHORT INTRODUCTION TO THE PSYCHOANALYTIC CONCEPT OF “POTENTIAL SPACE”

The psychoanalytic concept of “potential space” constitutes a key notion throughout my thesis. It is the kernel of the psychoanalytic underpinnings of my research. For this reason it is important to briefly describe the main ideas that constitute this notion and to outline the context in which I use this concept to understand the problem of my research.

The concept of potential space was suggested by the psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott⁵⁸ to describe a “third area of human living, one neither inside the individual nor outside in the world of shared reality.”⁵⁹ The potential space is the area of the subject’s experience where, during his/her infancy, instinctual activities called “transitional phenomena”⁶⁰ take place. Examples of such activities refer to thumb-sucking, or holding and possessing a blanket, a pillow or any other readily available soft object, which is called a “transitional object.”⁶¹ The potential space then is an “intermediate area, which is allowed to the infant between primary creativity and objective perception based on reality-testing.”⁶² Within this area, the transitional phenomena represent a space of “illusion”⁶³ between the mother and the baby. The mother’s breast is instinctually thought to be a part of the infant. In this sense, the transitional phenomena stand for the mother’s breast by giving

⁵⁸ D. W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, London: Tavistock Publications, 1971.
Also see: Jan Abram, *The Language of Winnicott: a dictionary of Winnicott’s use of words*, London: Karnac Books, 1996.

⁵⁹ D. W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, op. cit., p. 110.

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 4.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid., p. 11.

⁶³ Ibid.

meaning to the relationship of the infant to a transitional object. This intermediate area facilitates the development of the subject and contributes to his/her adaptation to a mature human being. It solves the “problem of the relationship between what is objectively perceived and what is subjectively conceived of.”⁶⁴ Winnicott writes:

This intermediate living can be thought of as occupying a potential space, negating the idea of space and separation between the baby and the mother, and all the developments derived from this phenomenon. This potential space varies greatly from individual to individual, and its foundation is the baby’s trust in the mother *experienced* over a long-enough period at the critical stage of the separation of the not-me from the me, when the establishment of an autonomous self is at the initial stage.⁶⁵

Having established the framework of ideas that explain the operation of the potential space as intermediate area of living, Winnicott draws attention to the importance of the idea of “playing”. He suggests that “playing has a space and a time”⁶⁶ and that this space and time “take place”⁶⁷ in the area of the potential space. He explains:

I make my idea of play concrete by claiming that *playing has a space and a time*. It is not *inside* by any use of the word (and it is unfortunately true that the word inside has very many and various uses in psychoanalytic discussion). Nor is it *outside*, that is to say, it is not a part of the repudiated world, the not-me, that which the individual has decided to recognize (with whatever difficulty and even pain) as truly external, which is outside magical control. To control what is outside one has to *do* things, not simply to think or to wish, and *doing things takes time*. Playing is doing...*It is play that is universal*, and that belongs to health: playing facilitates growth and therefore health.⁶⁸

It is understood, therefore, that the “potential space” is a transitional area of experience that facilitates the subject’s development from the state of being in fusion with the mother’s breast to the state of becoming a whole and autonomous

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 110.

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 41.

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 107.

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 41.

individual. This transition is based on reality-testing by means of creatively playing with the reality world and gaining cultural experiences.

Winnicott's psychoanalytic account regarding "playing and reality" within the intermediate area of "potential space" provides me with a set of concepts, which I use creatively to understand the relationship of the abstract photographic image to the inner world, and specifically the formal problem of emptiness as it emerges in my own practice. As I will explain in one of the following chapters, I borrow these psychoanalytic notions to establish a new framework of concepts within the discursive space of abstraction in photography. In particular, I will use these concepts to establish a methodological tool that leads to an understanding of the *empty space* of my practical work as a *potential space of abstraction* where *playing with the real* becomes the means of performing the relationship between internal and external reality and creating a new space of action and intervention.

In the chapters that follow I will throw more light into the concept of the potential space by giving a more detailed account of Winnicott's ideas in association with the writings of art theorists and critics, who employ these ideas to understand the concept of abstraction in art. In this respect, it will gradually become clear why I chose this particular concept to understand the problem of my research.

1.4 THE THREE MODELS OF ABSTRACTION

1.4.1 PSYCHOLOGICAL MODELS OF ABSTRACTION

In developing this model I will consider Wilhelm Worringer's argument from the early twentieth century and how this has had a profound influence even recently on the writings of critics like Donald Kuspit and Anton Ehrenzweig and also, as we shall see, on Deleuze. Although Kuspit and Ehrenzweig's positions were very different, their recognition of the problem of abstraction as either withdrawal from

or engagement with the external world, presented a framework for the development of a psychoanalytical approach to the abstract work of art through Kleinian and Winnicottian approaches adopted by writers like Adrian Stokes and Ehrenzweig.⁶⁹ Also, this psychoanalytical approach, which was based on the theories of *Object Relations* and *Transitional Phenomena* as proposed respectively by Melanie Klein⁷⁰ and Donald Winnicott, equipped art critics such as Peter Fuller and Briony Fer with a new vocabulary to analyse and theorize specific abstract works like Rothko's paintings and Eva Hesse's sculptures, which present the particular notion of emptiness as a prominent formal problem and are thus relevant to the discussion of similar problems in my practice.

1.4.1.1 ABSTRACTION AS WITHDRAWAL – Wilhelm Worringer, Donald Kuspit, Adrian Stokes

It has been argued that abstraction as an idea is embodied in every artistic act and that it is an essential part of every art. There are a number of artists and theorists who agreed with Gauguin in that “all art is abstract.”⁷² Leroi Gourhan⁷³ argued that “primitive art begins with the abstract, and even the prefigurative...Art is abstract from the outset and could not have been otherwise at its origin.”⁷⁴

⁶⁹ For a detailed account on the theoretical developments within the British School of Psychoanalysis and their contribution to psychoanalytic aesthetics see:

Nicola Glover, 'Psychoanalytic Aesthetics: The British School', *Free Associations* [online], 1998, [Accessed: 14 March 2004], Available at: <http://www.human-nature.com/free-associations/glover/>

⁷⁰ Melanie Klein, *Contributions to Psycho-Analysis 1921-1945*, The International Psycho-Analytical Library, No. 34, London: The Hogarth Press and The Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1973.

See also: Robert Hinshelwood, et al., *Melanie Klein for beginners*, Cambridge, England: Icon Books, 1997.

⁷² Rosa Olivares, 'The enigma of abstraction', *EXIT*, No. 14, 2004, p. 20.

⁷³ Andre Leroi Gourhan (1911-1986) was a French archaeologist best known for his work on paleolithic rock art.

⁷⁴ See Leroi Gourhan's quote in:

Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, 'The Smooth and the Striated', *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, London: The Athlone Press, 1988, p. 497.

A similar point of view was developed in the 1908 essay *Abstraction and Empathy* by Wilhelm Worringer, in which he suggests that the urge to abstraction is one of the two poles of aesthetic experience and the beginning of every artistic project. The urge to empathy is the counter-pole to abstraction. He contrasts empathy to abstraction by proposing that “empathy finds its gratification in the beauty for the organic,”⁷⁵ while abstraction locates beauty in the inorganic and “crystalline.”⁷⁶ However, he also points to their common origins in the need for self alienation, which, as he remarks, is “the deepest and ultimate essence of all aesthetic experience.”⁷⁷

The theory of empathy was developed in the writings of Theodor Lipps⁷⁸ and is based on the attitude of the contemplating subject towards the work of art as the start point for the aesthetic experience, rather than on the aesthetics of the art object itself. Writing at the beginning of the 20th century, Worringer argues in his essay that this “modern aesthetic” is no longer applicable to all areas of art history and that empathy is only one pole of the aesthetic experience. The latter is expressed by the formula that “aesthetic enjoyment is objectified self-enjoyment.”⁷⁹ This means that when a work of art, as a “sensuous object,”⁸⁰ is given to the viewer for aesthetic contemplation, it demands an activity that needs to be apperceived. A form is considered to be beautiful in the context of positive empathy, which is experienced when the natural tendencies and self-activation of needs within the spectator are in unison with the demands for activity set by the sensuous object. An ugly form, on the other hand, is the result of negative empathy that reveals a conflict between those tendencies. Consequently, the contemplating subject is filled with happiness as a

⁷⁵ Wilhelm Worringer, *Abstraction and Empathy: A Contribution to the Psychology of Style*, New York: International Universities Press, 1953, p. 4.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 23.

⁷⁸ Ibid., p.136.

Here Worringer writes that a summary of the ideas of Lipps regarding the concept of “empathy” have been published in January 1906 in the weekly periodical *Zukunft*.

⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 5.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

Worringer writes about the “sensuous object”:

Every sensuous object, in so far as it exists for me, is always the product of two components, of that which is sensuously given and of my apperceptive activity.

result of the satisfaction of his/her needs for activity, the energy of life. By drawing upon Alois Riegl,⁸¹ Worringer notes that the value of a work of art lies in its beauty, which is essentially the power to satisfy the psychic needs of its beholder, therefore offering him happiness. Hence, the role of the “absolute artistic volition as a gauge for the quality of these psychic needs.”⁸²

It is necessary to clarify here that beauty according to Worringer refers to artistic beauty as opposed to natural beauty. The work of art as an autonomous object stands “beside nature on equal terms, and in its deepest and innermost essence, devoid of any connection with it.”⁸³ Additionally, when discussing empathy as an aesthetic experience, he refers to works of art that constitute a “reproduction of organically beautiful vitality”⁸⁴ according to the demands of Naturalism as an art movement.

Empathy, therefore, is a process during which the subject is projecting his inner feelings and psychic needs into the organic forms of the art object, which then functions as the vehicle for their gratification. Worringer remarks that it is not the object that pleases the viewer with its form. Quite to the contrary, it is the spectator that forms the art work, which cannot exist outside the apperceptive activity of the subject. Its form has been permeated by the spectator, through his/her inner activity and life.

Looking at the “lifeless forms of pyramids and the Byzantine mosaics,”⁸⁵ which seem to suppress the organic and suggest an impulse completely opposing to empathy, Worringer observes that the urge to empathy is not adequate for the

⁸¹ Ibid., p. 9.

⁸² Ibid., p. 13.

According to Worringer the idea of the “absolute artistic volition” was introduced by Alois Riegl, who considered it to be the primary factor of creation. It refers to “the latent inner demand which exists per se, entirely independent of the object and of the mode of creation, and behaves as will to form....every work of art is simply an objectification of this a priori existent absolute artistic volition.”

⁸³ Ibid., p. 3.

⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 14.

⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 14.

understanding of such works. He proposes that the urge to abstraction is the impulse from which these works are drawn.

Developing this insight he remarks that the first signs exhibiting an inclination towards abstraction were manifest in primitive art.⁸⁶ He argues that abstraction lies at the beginning of every art. The urge to abstraction is regarded by Worringer as a withdrawal from the world of external objects and visual experiences. It is considered to be the outcome of the fear experienced by the primitive subject for the unknown expanded possibilities of space and the chaos of the arbitrariness of life. The need for tranquillity and reassurance away from the instability of the world phenomena led people to find happiness, not by empathising themselves with the things, but by extracting the things out of their original natural context, seeking a purification of their materiality and attributing them the status of an absolute form. The abstract forms are then elevated to a transcendental level of existence, functioning as entities that are completely separated from this world.

The search for order and control of the chaotic life found fruition in the regularity of the geometric line. The pure abstract geometric form is, as Worringer notes, “a purely instinctive creation”⁸⁷ that initially came into being based on the elemental necessity of the primitive subject and not on the results of any intellectual calculations. With reference to Alois Riegl again, Worringer relates abstraction to its manifestation in the crystalline beauty of inanimate matter. He writes:

Riegl speaks of crystalline beauty, “which constitutes the first and most eternal law of form in inanimate matter, and comes closest to absolute beauty (material individuality).”⁸⁸

The crystalline matter is the matter with the most geometrically arranged structure, hence the reason for its contemplation as an example of abstract beauty. Its orderliness is almost inconceivable in comparison with the irregularity and disorder

⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 15.

⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 19.

⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 20.

of the world. In that structural purity of form, as Riegl suggests, primitive people found a confirmation of their own human nature by rendering “the external things in their clear material individuality as the ultimate goal of the plastic art.”⁸⁹ The “approximation of representation to a plane”⁹⁰ on the one hand and the “strict suppression of the representation of space and exclusive rendering of the single form”⁹¹ on the other, were the results of the urge to abstraction.

The above need for self-confirmation affirms the need for self-alienation that Worringer presents as the common need and deepest source for all aesthetic experience both in the urge to abstraction, as well as in the urge to empathy. From the need for self-alienation springs the “spiritual dread of space,”⁹² that is the fear for the impossibility of the non-individualisation of space, as the only object that cannot stand as a single form. This fear results in the urge to abstraction and the need to:

...seek deliverance from the fortuitousness of humanity as a whole, from the seeming arbitrariness of organic existence in general, in the contemplation of something necessary and irrefragable. Life as such is felt to be a disturbance of aesthetic enjoyment.⁹³

On the other hand, the desire for self-alienation in the case of empathy is fulfilled in the contemplation of organic forms, in the external real objects, as an attempt to negate the subject’s unlimited possibilities and restrict them within the limits of the objects. Worringer’s position on the dualism of aesthetic experience provides me with the theoretical material to develop further his model of aesthetics and draw a parallel between this and Adrian Stokes’ psychologically based aesthetic framework,

⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 21.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid., p. 16.

⁹³ Ibid., p. 24.

which is based on the two developmental positions as introduced by Melanie Klein⁹⁴ and is enriched with the theory of “transitional phenomena” by Donald Winnicott.

Donald Kuspit⁹⁵ is also in favour of abstraction as a form of withdrawal, one which offers the subject a sort of relief from the threatening modern world. His work can be read as a psychologically informed development of Worringer’s original approaches to abstraction and empathy as based on different types of psychological experience.

Oscar Wilde has said that the work of art is “the only shield against the sordid perils of actual existence”⁹⁶, making the aesthetic point very clear according to Donald Kuspit,⁹⁷ who finds this statement to be the epitome of what is psychologically at stake in the aesthetic attitude. In his account of the role of psychoanalysis in analyzing the psychological purpose and import of form, Kuspit considers the idea of “*aesthetic disinterestedness*” (or else the interest in form) to be the psychic shield that “not only protects against reality, but behind the aesthetic shield a zone of psychic freedom is established.”⁹⁸ He writes:

The sense of invulnerability is the grandest, and as I hope to show, the most necessary of all illusions – delusions. It is the illusion that the formal integration of the work of art catalyses. From the aesthetic viewpoint, we go to art to remove our selves from life, not just as an empty exercise in distancing – a temporary emotional escape – but because distance contains within itself the germ and myth of invulnerability, untouchability. Out of this the idea of the sacred grows, that is, the idea of the divineness of art. Art – or rather,

⁹⁴ Melanie Klein, ‘Some theoretical conclusions regarding the emotional life of the infant’, in Joan Riviere, ed., *Developments in Psycho-Analysis*, The International Psycho-Analytical Library, No. 43, London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1973.

⁹⁵ Donald Kuspit is an art critic and a professor of art history and philosophy at the State University of New York at Stony Brook, but he has also studied Psychoanalysis and has worked as a clinical lecturer in psychiatry.

⁹⁶ Oscar Wilde, ‘The Critic As Artist’, *Intentions*, New York: Bretano’s, 1912, p. 168.

⁹⁷ Donald Kuspit, ‘A Psychoanalytic Understanding of Aesthetic Disinterestedness’, *Signs of Psyche in Modern and Postmodern Art*, London: Cambridge University Press, 1993, p. 337.

⁹⁸ Donald Kuspit, ‘A Psychoanalytic Understanding of Aesthetic Disinterestedness’, op. cit., p. 337.

the formal element in art – is compensation for and relief from the personal feeling of vulnerability that invariably comes with the recognition of impersonal reality.⁹⁹

Kuspit suggests that the illusion of invulnerability provides the condition for free functioning of the psyche, for fictive play and free mentation, which are the basic requirements of creativity, a zone that he considers to be akin to *transitional phenomena*.

The concept of *transitional phenomena* refers, according to Winnicott, to “an intermediate area of experiencing”¹⁰⁰ between inner reality and external reality to which both types of life contribute. This intermediate area is for Winnicott the “only place where play can start, a place that is at the continuity-contiguity moment, where transitional phenomena originate.”¹⁰¹ He states:

And on the basis of playing is built the whole of man’s experiential existence. No longer are we either introvert or extrovert. We experience life in the area of transitional phenomena, in the exciting interweave of subjectivity and objective observation, and in an area that is intermediate between the inner reality of the individual and the shared reality of the world that is external to individuals.¹⁰²

When Kuspit speaks of the illusion of invulnerability that provides the condition for free functioning of the psyche, he clearly finds a parallel in Winnicott’s description of transitional phenomena as belonging to an “*area of illusion*,” “which is at the basis of initiation of experience.”¹⁰³ This is an area where the infant relates to the objects and employs an object as a “*not-me possession*,”¹⁰⁴ the so-called “*transitional object*” that stands for the “*mother’s breast*,” or in other words it is the illusion for the “*good-enough mothering*.” Winnicott’s remark suggests that the transitional object and transitional phenomena take place in an area of safety that envelops the infant with trust in his/her first steps of experiencing and perceiving

⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 337.

¹⁰⁰ D.W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, op. cit., p. 2.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., p. 103.

¹⁰² Ibid., p. 64.

¹⁰³ Ibid., p. 14.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., p. 1.

objective reality. He states that it is a “neutral area of experience which will not be challenged.”¹⁰⁵ Within this area – the “*potential space*” between the baby and the mother - the creativity originates and facilitates the infant’s journey from “what is subjectively conceived of” to “what is objectively perceived.”¹⁰⁶ Winnicott’s writing illustrates this connection between illusion and creativity very clearly:

The mother’s adaptation to the infant’s needs, when good enough, gives the infant the *illusion* that there is an external reality that corresponds to the infant’s own capacity to create. In other words, there is an overlap between what the mother supplies and what the child might conceive of¹⁰⁷ ...Play is in fact neither a matter of inner psychic reality nor a matter of external reality¹⁰⁸ ...The place where cultural experience is located is in the potential space between the individual and the environment (originally the object). The same can be said of playing. Cultural experience begins with creative living first manifested in play.¹⁰⁹

It becomes evident from his writing, and it is worthwhile noticing, that when Winnicott speaks of creativity he refers not only to the creation of art but also to a general creative attitude towards external reality. Consideration of Winnicott’s ideas leads me to suggest that the invulnerability to which Kuspit refers can be linked to those conditions of trust and safety that are responsible for the free creative play and free functioning of the psyche. But how do these concepts concerning the “potential space” of experience and the invulnerability of a work of art relate to Kuspit’s general ideas about abstraction as withdrawal?

Kuspit attempted to develop an insight into the psychological reasons that might have led modern artists to express themselves by making a pivotal turn to abstraction as a movement in art. Within this context he considers that form is “the cultural transformation and framing of psychonatural subject matter or motifs that makes it

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., p. 12.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., p. 11.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., p. 12.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., p. 96.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., p. 100.

significant for civilization.”¹¹⁰ This cultural form, he observes, “fails to completely civilize psychonatural subject matter.”¹¹¹ Particularly he writes:

Refined cultural form exists in unresolved dialectical tension and play with unrefined subject matter in the best – most true to the depth and wholeness of reality – cultural phenomena, neither dominating the other.¹¹²

The unstable and unresolved character of this external/ internal relation between the aesthetic form and its psychic subject matter is indicative of the “uncompromising” play of the creativity zone. The transformation from raw to “sophisticated cultural form” is a journey equivalent to what Winnicott has called “the individual traveling from dependence towards independence”¹¹³ or in other words the travelling through the potential space.

Kuspit seems to believe that the tendency of modern art towards purity and concreteness, as suggested by Greenberg, is not due to its acceptance of the modern, industrializing world, but due to a “self-protective disaffection with it.”¹¹⁴ In this sense, the unhappiness of the subject towards modern culture and civilization’s misery, in combination with the experience of his/her inner normal unhappiness developed the conditions that led to the creation of abstract art as a demonstration of his/her withdrawn attitude. Kuspit argues that “the avant-garde artist sustained belief in the omnipotence of art” threatened by the new “spacetime” that the modern implied, “by making it enigmatic.”¹¹⁵ Referencing Adorno’s use of the term he translates Greenberg’s purity of abstract art as a certain kind of “unintelligibility” and mystification. He states:

¹¹⁰ Donald Kuspit, ‘The Use and Abuse of Applied Psychoanalysis’, *Signs of Psyche in Modern and Postmodern Art*, London: Cambridge University Press, 1993, p. 329.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ D.W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, op. cit., p. 151.

¹¹⁴ Donald Kuspit, ‘A Freudian Note on Abstract Art’, *Signs of Psyche in Modern and Postmodern Art*, London: Cambridge University Press, 1993, p. 101.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., p. 102.

There is no doubt something ironical about this unintelligibility, or enigmatic quality of art, for abstract art is supposedly both modern and universal – simultaneously timely, or appropriate to and intelligible in terms of the modern world, and timeless, unequivocally transcendent. This contradiction – generalized to the assertion that the language of pure art is modern because it revolts against the traditional mimetic language of art, yet is also ahistorical and asocial because it has no representational purpose – is the core of abstract art's apotheosis of art as enigmatic....This ambiguity suggests an ambivalent response to the modern world – defensive as well as accepting and assimilative. It is the defensive aspect of the response that has particular psychoanalytic resonance.¹¹⁶

This psychoanalytic resonance of abstract art corresponds to the hidden anxiety of the artist, embodied in an enigmaticness that “represses the anxiety while unwittingly articulating it.”¹¹⁷ According to Kuspit, the artist expresses his/her belief in the magical power of art, and therefore his anxiety towards the fear of losing that power, by investing the formal elements - magical toys - with his/her infantile sense of omnipotence. With reference to Winnicott and Klein he speaks of the “unintelligible” quality of abstract art as being the “apotheosis of the feeling of chaos, of disintegration, of lacking emotions.”¹¹⁸ Kuspit observes that while Winnicott discusses “why there exists a relationship between the deepest conflicts that reveal themselves in religion and in art forms and the depressed mood or melancholic illness,”¹¹⁹ he remarks:

At the depressive position in the emotional development of an infant or a patient, we see the building up of the good and bad according to whether the instinctual experiences are satisfactory or frustrative. The good becomes protected from the bad, and a highly complex personal pattern is established as a system of defence against the chaos within and without.¹²⁰

¹¹⁶ Ibid., pp. 102-103.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., p. 103.

¹¹⁸ Donald Kuspit, ‘The Will to Unintelligibility in Modern Art: Abstraction Reconsidered’, *Signs of Psyche in Modern and Postmodern Art*, London: Cambridge University Press, 1993, p. 119.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., p. 117.

¹²⁰ D.W. Winnicott, ‘Psycho-Analysis and the sense of Guilt’, *The Maturation Processes and the Facilitating Environment: Studies in the Theory of Emotional Development*, The International Psycho-Analytical Library, No. 64, London: The Hogarth Press and The Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1965, p. 25.

Then Kuspit relates this to the theories of Klein:¹²¹

Melanie Klein has written that, “one of the main factors underlying the need for integration is the individual’s feeling that integration implies being alive, loving, and being loved by the internal and external good object; that is to say there exists a close link between integration and object relations. Conversely, the feeling of chaos, of disintegration, of lacking emotions as a result of splitting, I take to be closely related to the fear of death. I have maintained...that the fear of annihilation by the destructive forces within is the deepest fear of all.”¹²²

Building on the ideas of Winnicott and Klein, Kuspit suggests that what he calls “unintelligible art” is the reflection of the struggle between the destructive and constructive forces in the self. Unintelligible art is as constructive as it is destructive. To elaborate this further and explain it in relation to its psychoanalytical underpinnings, I will draw upon the origins of creativity from the perspective of Klein and Winnicott’s theory of “object-relating” with the external world’s objects.

The *depressive position*, to which Winnicott refers in the above quote, was first proposed by Melanie Klein as the stage following the *paranoid-schizoid position* in the development of the subject. Both positions are identified by reference to the ego and only secondarily by reference to the libido. During the depressive position the ego has achieved a measure of integration that allows the infant to perceive his/her *external objects* – his/her mother included – as *whole, separate, not-me objects*, in opposition to the *internal part-objects* of the paranoid-schizoid position, with which he/she feels in unity and under states of fusion. As the infant is going through his/her depressive position he/she realizes his/her whole objects to be both *good* and *bad* depending on the degree that these satisfy his instincts and desires. The dual nature of his/her objects exposes the infant to the “conflict of ambivalence, of simultaneous love and hate, attraction and rejection towards the same object,”

¹²¹ Donald Kuspit, ‘The Will to Unintelligibility in Modern Art: Abstraction Reconsidered’, op. cit., p. 118.

¹²² Melanie Klein, ‘On Identification’, *Envy and Gratitude*, New York, Free Press, Macmillan, 1985, p. 144.

including the “loved and gratifying mother who is now also the dangerous frustrating person.”¹²³ This conflict creates severe anxieties, which are expressed through the mouth as the main instrument of early love, whose aim is to incorporate the loved object as well as to express hostile aggressive impulses and reject the object. Still under oral primacy, the infant’s desire to “incorporate the good object is fraught with the danger of taking in its badness, and conversely the expulsion of the bad inner object threatens the loss of its goodness.”¹²⁴ His/her internal whole world feels destroyed and in order to recover from experiencing the feeling of loss and guilt, he/she develops a desire and need for reparation and restoration of the lost loved objects outside and within the ego.

Klein’s concept of the reparative impulses, that the infant is led to out of his/her destructive impulses against his/her internal objects, can contribute to the subject of the origin of creativity, but as Winnicott notes, “Klein’s important work does not reach to the subject of creativity itself.”¹²⁵ He points out, however, that the usefulness of her concept of reparation lies in her position on the “guilt sense”, which helps in filling up the absence felt in the *potential space* between the infant and the mother in the process of the “baby’s separating-out of the world of objects from the self.”¹²⁶

It is understood therefore, that creativity derives from the positive aspect of the destructive forces in the self, and that the reparative impulses lead to the construction of something new. This implies a bidirectional relationship between the destructive and constructive forces, which determine the initiation of creativity. On the one hand, creativity and a constructive attitude emanate from the desire to destroy internally the external object and on the other hand the destructiveness towards the object springs from the urge to relate to the object and experience it as a

¹²³ Paula Heimann, ‘Certain Functions Of Introjection And Projection In Early Infancy’, in Joan Riviere, ed., *Developments in Psycho-Analysis*, The International Psycho-Analytical Library, No. 43, London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1973, pp. 160-161.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 161.

¹²⁵ D. W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, op. cit., p. 70.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 108.

part of the shared reality by making sense of it, a process that also consists of a positive, creative attitude towards the external world.

Winnicott elaborates this clearly by emphasizing that “the destructive drive is that, which creates the quality of externality” in contrast with the “assumption in orthodox theory, that aggression is reactive to the encounter with the reality principle.”¹²⁷ He uses the word “destruction” not as an expression of the infant’s impulse to destroy, but as a demonstration of the object’s failure to survive, which also involves the change in quality, in attitude. By looking at the exact place of the attack and survival in the hierarchy of relationships he makes his position explicit and he provides an explanation of the distinction between relating to an object and using an object. He states:

More primitive and quite different is annihilation. Annihilation means “no hope”; cathexis withers up because no result completes the reflex to produce conditioning. On the other hand, attack in anger relative to the encounter with the reality principle is a more sophisticated concept, postdating the destruction that I postulate here. *There is no anger* in the destruction of the object to which I am referring, though there could be said to be joy at the object’s survival. From this moment, or arising out of this phase, the object is *in fantasy* always being destroyed. This quality of “always being destroyed” makes the reality of the surviving object felt as such, strengthens the feeling tone, and contributes to object-constancy. The object can now be used.¹²⁸

He suggests the following sequence, progressing from the moment of relating to an object that may be a subjective object to the moment of usage of the external object:

This sequence can be observed: (1) Subject *relates* to object. (2) Object is in process of being found instead of placed by the subject in the world. (3) Subject *destroys* object. (4) Object survives destruction. (5) Subject can *use* object. The object is always being destroyed. This destruction becomes the unconscious backcloth for love of a real object; that is, an object outside the area of the subject’s omnipotent control.¹²⁹

¹²⁷ Ibid., p. 93.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Ibid., p. 94.

We can understand now how this entire process of object-relating,¹³⁰ informed by the destructive/constructive impulses, underpins the significance of playing as the factor that contributes to the origins of creativity, from Winnicott's perspective, and therefore leads to the development of the subject and his/her adaptation to the external reality. According to Winnicott, "it is in playing and only in playing that the individual child or adult is able to be creative and to use the whole personality, and it is only in being creative that the individual discovers the self."¹³¹

Let us now relate this discussion back to Kuspit's speculations around the reasons why abstract modern art is felt to be "unintelligible". It has become clear now under which conditions the creative "*play with reality*", takes place and how the destructiveness and constructiveness of unintelligible art relate to the destructive and constructive forces of the self. In developing his ideas about the double contradictory nature of abstract art, Kuspit introduces his own term of "incommunicado communication – the communication of an enigma" after Winnicott's description of abstract picture as a "cul-de-sac communication (communication with subjective objects), which are charged with destructive and constructive, persecutory, and reparative connotations."¹³² Discussing Winnicott's statement about the abstract picture carrying all the "sense of real" and being a "communication of true self"¹³³ like "the mystic's withdrawal into a personal inner

¹³⁰ On the use and relationships to objects in art, theory and criticism from a Winnicottian psychoanalytic perspective see also:

Mignon Nixon, 'Introduction', *October Magazine*, No. 113, Summer 2005, pp. 3-8.

Tamar Garb and Mignon Nixon, 'A Conversation with Juliet Mitchell', *October Magazine*, No. 113, Summer 2005, pp. 9-26.

Juliet Mitchell, 'Theory as an Object', *October Magazine*, No. 113, Summer 2005, pp. 27-38.

¹³¹ D. W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, op. cit., p. 54.

¹³² Donald Kuspit, 'The Will to Unintelligibility in Modern Art: Abstraction Reconsidered', op. cit., p. 119.

¹³³ D.W. Winnicott, 'Communicating and Not Communicating Leading to a Study of Certain Opposites', *The Maturation Processes and the Facilitating Environment: Studies in the Theory of Emotional Development*, The International Psycho-Analytical Library, No. 64, London: The Hogarth Press and The Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1965, p. 184.

world of sophisticated introjects,”¹³⁴ Kuspit suggests that the destructive character of abstract art may induce the artist to withdraw from the world, while its “exaltation may be an indication of communication with the introjects of the inner world.”¹³⁵ By this he means that abstract art is a demonstration of the artist’s disaffection with the unhappiness caused by the modern world and, by emerging as enigmatic and difficult to understand, shows the self-protective act of the artist towards his external reality. Abstract art emerges from Kuspit’s writing as the reflection of the true self of the subject. He writes:

At the core of unintelligible abstract art is the sense of true self, that is, of a self that is really human – only it is in an incommunicado condition. The unworldliness or withdrawn quality of unintelligible abstract art – its nonrepresentationality, that is, refusal to represent the world of shared reality, inseparable from the turn to abstract art – is at bottom a defensive regression to a primitive world of authentic selfhood in the face of the modern world, which has made us all too false to ourselves...Artistic withdrawal to unintelligibility is one “mystical” way of doing so. The cul-de-sac communication of unintelligible abstract art is a relatively social means of withdrawing, but it remains a mode of exalted humanness out of reach for most human beings, for it is too sophisticated and paradoxical a means – too human in tone and appearance. It neither represents human beings nor tries to communicate collective feelings. Nonetheless, it remains a socially approved if marginal way of re-identifying oneself.¹³⁶

In conclusion, Kuspit’s concept of abstraction in modern art revolves around its “enigmaticness” and “unintelligibility”, presented as an invulnerable shield against the external world’s threats and anxieties. Abstraction in Kuspit’s account

¹³⁴ Ibid., p. 185-186.

The way Winnicott compares the sense of “feeling real” in a withdrawn communication with subjective objects with mysticism experiences is clear here:

In thinking of the psychology of mysticism, it is usual to concentrate on the understanding of the mystic’s withdrawal into a personal inner world of sophisticated introjects. Perhaps not enough attention has been paid to the mystic’s retreat to a position in which he can communicate secretly with subjective objects and phenomena, the loss of contact with the world of shared reality being counterbalanced by a gain in terms of feeling real.

¹³⁵ Donald Kuspit, ‘The Will to Unintelligibility in Modern Art: Abstraction Reconsidered’, op. cit., p. 119.

¹³⁶ Ibid., pp. 119-120.

represents the artist's withdrawal from the world's objects into his/her inner world of subjective introjected objects, which provide him/her with a free ground to constructively express his/her true self.

Adrian Stokes' approach to abstraction has similarities to Kuspit's as he also sees abstract art as a form of withdrawal from the threatening world. What is different in his approach from Kuspit's is that he developed his own model of aesthetics from the Kleinian psychoanalysis, which provides a new vocabulary of terms to contemplate the aesthetic form, both representational and abstract. In this context, and as it will emerge in the following paragraphs, he seems to ascribe to the art form a magic power that protects against cultural pressures.

In the book *Colour and Form (1937)*, Stokes formulated an aesthetic model of art as consisting of two modes; the "carving" and "modelling" traditions.¹³⁷ I would suggest that these two modes of art represent two modes of playing with and relating creatively to the world's objects and materials in the process of producing art objects.

In his aesthetic model Stokes correlated the "carving" and "modelling" traditions with the two positions Melanie Klein proposed: the paranoid-schizoid position and the depressive position. For Stokes the artist of the carving tradition is preoccupied with revealing the face of a form that already exists while the modeller makes things: he/she does not disclose a face. "He imbues spatial objects with the animus and calculation of inner life. He projects the lively feeling, though not as a disclosed state."¹³⁸ Discussing Stokes' differentiation between "carving" and "modelling" Richard Wollheim notes:

The carver, we are to imagine, in respecting the integrity and the separateness of the stone, celebrates at once the whole object with which he characteristically enters into relation and

¹³⁷ Adrian Stokes, 'Carving and Modelling', in Richard Wollheim, ed., *The Image in Form: Selected Writings of Adrian Stokes*, London: Penguin Books, 1972, pp. 47-48.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

also the integrated ego that he projects...The modelled work of art can be thought of as the mirror-image of the "carved" work of art...In the "carved" work of art there is a lack of any sharp internal differentiation: the individual forms are unemphatic, and the transitions between them are gradual...By contrast, in the "modelled" work of art there are sharp transitions and considerable internal differentiation: the forms are distinct and individuated...Just as a lack of sharp internal distinctions produces separateness from the spectator, or self-sufficiency, so an insistence upon internal distinctions produces a loss of separateness, or a dependence upon the spectator. In this loss of separateness, which is also called the "incantatory" element in art or art's "invitation", we can see how the tradition to which this effect typically belongs enables its objects to epitomize both the part-objects of early relations and the still inchoate ego, which enters into such relations.¹³⁹

From this explanation we can assume that from the spectator's point of view, the aesthetic experience is different in terms of a conceptual distance between the "carving" and "modelling" modes. In the context of the "carving" mode of aesthetic experience the work of art is perceived as a *whole object* that stands on its own and with which the viewer engages as a separate object. By contrast the "modelling" mode suggests that there is no separateness of the work of art from the beholder who experiences it in parts while he/she attempts to understand it and perceive it as a whole. Initially, the existence of such distance between "carving" and "modelling" was also Stokes' position, but he later revised his argument into one where there is no distance between the two modes during the object-relationship of the spectator to the art object. He stated that there is no distance between the relationship that "entails an envelopment with the object and the relationship that preserves intact an independent and separated object."¹⁴⁰ This means that the spectator who confronts a work of art is able to perceive it as a separate, not-me object, but at the same time he/she experiences a feeling of oneness with it that invites him/her to be enveloped and overwhelmed with the aesthetic feeling. Stokes speaks of the work of art as being a "self-inclusive entity, no less apparent in

¹³⁹ Richard Wollheim, 'Introduction', in Richard Wollheim, ed., *The Image in Form: Selected Writings of Adrian Stokes*, London: Penguin Books, 1972, pp. 27-28.

¹⁴⁰ Adrian Stokes, 'Some Connexions and Differences between Visionary and Aesthetic Experience', in Lawrence Gowing, ed., *The Critical Writings of Adrian Stokes III (1955-67)*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1978, p. 161.

modern, even abstract art than in other art.”¹⁴¹ While he considers form in art to be a reconstitution of “the independent, self-sufficient outside good object, the whole mother whom the infant should accept to be independent from himself, as well as of the enveloping good breast of the earliest phase, at the foundation of the ego, the relationship with which is of the merging kind.”¹⁴² This statement reveals how the aesthetic experience derived from the formal element in art is the combination of the two Kleinian positions, the depressive and the paranoid-schizoid, and consequently of the two modes of art.

This is also evident in his writings about the relationship between the artist and his/her product of art, from which it is clear that the reparative impulses of the self contribute to the origins of creativity, as previously argued by Winnicott. Stokes articulates this as follows:

The artist is compelled to overcome depressive fantasies¹⁴³ by making amend,...the amend that articulates together an all-embracing physical entity with bodily separateness, reconstructions of internalized good objects, threatened by the bad. Content, subject-matter, may be unredeemed; formal magic must rule over the pressures of culture.¹⁴⁴

Apparently, this formal magic character with which he imbues the aesthetic form correlates with Kuspit’s position that sees the abstract work of art as a shield against

¹⁴¹ Ibid., p. 170.

¹⁴² Ibid., p. 211.

¹⁴³ There is a distinction between “fantasy” and “phantasy”. The former refers to conscious day dreams, while the later to unconscious mental content. The concept of “phantasy” was introduced by Freud and forms the link between “instincts” and “mechanisms”. They play a dominant role in the subject’s development and adaptation to reality thinking since they become elaborated through external experience but they do not depend upon such experience for their existence. For a detailed account on the definition and function of unconscious “phantasies” see:

Susan Isaacs, ‘The nature and function of phantasy’, in Joan Riviere, ed., *Developments in Psycho-Analysis*, The International Psycho-Analytical Library, No. 43, London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1973, pp. 67-121.

For an account on fantasy in psychoanalysis see also:

Elizabeth Cowie, ‘Fantasia’, in Jessica Evans and Stuart Hall, ed., *Visual culture: the reader*, London: Sage Publications, 1999, pp. 356-369.

¹⁴⁴ Adrian Stokes, ‘Art and the Body’, in Richard Wollheim, ed., *The Image in Form: Selected Writings of Adrian Stokes*, London: Penguin Books, 1972, p. 118.

the misery and anxieties of the external world. Moreover, Stokes argues this by emphasizing the abstract form as an indicator of a protective attitude against the objective world:

I believe all art, when observed from the side of its form, even anti-humanist art, projects an image of the body and the integrated mind, symbolises a sensuous object-character distinct from ourselves and from the kaleidoscopic brightness it may include, the unitary undertone, of visionary envelopment. Our own stability walks hand in hand with the stability of objects. When culture is attuned to actual or potential traumatic experience, famine, earthquake, pestilence, to privation and persecution or to cultural chaos, art increases its abstraction.¹⁴⁵

The stability of objects implies the stability of space, which for Stokes is a kind of surface that records time, and because space is equivalent to the visual world, “the visual world is an accumulation of time apprehended instantaneously.”¹⁴⁶ When the visual world, the spacetime, loses its balance, the stability of the subject is shaken by his/her fear of losing his/her integration and existence. This raises the significance of the body as an idea. All living experiences are felt through the body, inside and outside of it. Taking food through the mouth is a response to the primary need for it to be kept alive. The fear of annihilation finds reparation in its abstract expression in art, whose “appeal of form is, in part, oral, encompassing, enveloping”¹⁴⁷ and becomes more concrete than ever before. The oral function of the body in its primary employment of the oral introjections becomes significant not only for the artist during the making process but also for the work of art and its form, whose appeal is incorporated by the viewer during his/her aesthetic confrontation with it, but at the same time is perceived and enjoyed as a quality belonging to a separate, autonomous object of work of art.

¹⁴⁵ Adrian Stokes, ‘Some Connexions and Differences between Visionary and Aesthetic Experience’, *op. cit.*, p. 171.

¹⁴⁶ Adrian Stokes, ‘Carving and Modelling’, *op. cit.*, p. 47.

¹⁴⁷ Adrian Stokes, ‘Some Connexions and Differences between Visionary and Aesthetic Experience’, *op. cit.*, p. 172.

Stokes' "carving" and "modelling" modes of art establish an aesthetic framework of ideas, which is useful in so far as it employs Kleinian psychoanalytic concepts to understand the artist-subject's creativity in relationship to his/her external world, as well as to analyse and interpret the aesthetic form. The aesthetic form, regardless of its representational or abstract character, stands as a magic wall that guards the subject from the cultural pressures. Abstraction becomes a measure for the world's pressures. The more chaotic and threatening the world is, the more abstract the form presents itself, transmitting "an image not only optical but also for the mind"¹⁴⁸ that invites comparison and association with other experiences both visual and internal. In this respect, we can assume that both Stokes and Kuspit consider abstraction to be a form of withdrawal, which by rendering form as something magic, and therefore unworldly and transcendental, allows the subject to enter in a state of relief from the external world's preoccupations.

A consideration of Stokes' Kleinian approach to art, in close association with Winnicott's development of Klein's "Object Relations", will help me to rethink Worringer's early approach. I would like to suggest a parallel between the two aspects of Worringer's aesthetic model – "empathy" and "abstraction" – and Stokes' two modes of art – "carving" and "modelling." The object-relationship of the spectator to the work of art that "entails an envelopment with the object"¹⁴⁹ functions, as we saw, in a parallel manner to the modelling mode and moreover to the paranoid-schizoid position that underpins this mode. Empathy can be attributed with the same function, while abstraction is in parallel with the carving mode or depressive position, which suggests that the relationship of the viewer to the art object preserves this object intact, independent and separated during the aesthetic experience.

I will elaborate this more fully in revising Worringer's aesthetic model to consider its potential for illuminating all kinds of art forms, regardless of their organic or

¹⁴⁸ Adrian Stokes, 'From the Image in Form', in Richard Wollheim, ed., *The Image in Form: Selected Writings of Adrian Stokes*, London: Penguin Books, 1972, p. 126.

¹⁴⁹ See footnote 140.

inorganic nature, and to function as a model for aesthetically experiencing life itself, rather than withdrawing completely from it. As in Stokes' case, both modes of art contribute equally to the aesthetic experience, and in the same manner abstraction and empathy can be seen as two stages in the beholder's contemplation of a work of art. Abstraction in this sense refers not only to the production process but also to the way it invites a certain act of looking and a certain state of mind as part of the viewer's behaviour towards the art object.

Within this context, I consider empathy to be the first stage of aesthetic experience during which the subject envelops him/herself with the object and finds gratification of his/her inner needs by projecting him/herself into the object. This psychological process or state of mind relates to the paranoid-schizoid position, the state of feeling at one with the objects. In psychoanalytic terms, by looking for the attention of his/her mother, the baby in fusion with her breast, that represents his/her first part-object relationship, has the illusion that he/she is individualized; he/she is the centre of the world, since he/she has no sense of the separateness of the world objects. The infant has a subjective sense of his/her self but that self is not an objectively self contained being, is still in fusion with the world. Creating an analogy to the art, it is as though his/her being is one with the space, like one single form; this absolute existence of space that is the ultimate, utopian desire of the subject.

This fusion creates states of hatred and persecution because when the needs of the baby are not satisfied by his/her mother, as expected due to the illusionism condition of oneness with her, he/she feels his/her whole world destroyed and chaotic. The fear of the chaotic existence urges him/her to seek freedom out of the instability of chaos and leads him/her to the depressive position of perceiving external objects to be entities separate from him/her.

Turning to Winnicott, we can recall that illusion for him is "at the basis of initiating experience."¹⁵⁰ The viewer is going through the transitional journey between the two

¹⁵⁰ See footnote 103.

positions in an “exciting interweave of subjectivity and objective observation.”¹⁵¹ The depressive position requires a certain degree of abstraction in order for him/her to achieve the realization of the external, objective reality of the work of art. That is why I speculate that abstraction is the ultimate manifestation of the depressive position, which the spectator is going through during the process of the aesthetic experience. It springs from his/her deepest need for self-alienation, which is manifested in the attempt to separate the art object from his/her empathizing state and render it in a single, ideal, autonomous form.

Abstraction, therefore, becomes the pure, absolute expression of the subject’s state of mind in the aesthetic appreciation and enjoyment of the art work. In other words, it stands for the ultimate way of visualizing the world in a single form, thus satisfying the subject’s needs for self confirmation. But I would like to suggest that this ideal degree of abstraction never attains its maximum realization, since it is the space of transitional phenomena that defines the subject’s experience of the world and consequently of art. It is the intermediate space between empathy and abstraction that shapes the subject’s appreciation of the art form and constitutes the context in which all world phenomena are perceived and experienced in general. Empathizing with the world and abstracting from the world without any discrimination between organic and non-organic form are both inherent tendencies of the subject that define his/her own nature and contribute equally to the experience of reality.

1.4.1.2 ABSTRACTION AS PROCESS I – Anton Ehrenzweig

Anton Ehrenzweig in the *Hidden Order of Art* (1967) suggests a different approach to abstraction that is opposed to the model of abstraction as pure withdrawal. According to Ehrenzweig’s position abstraction is not just a sterile withdrawal from the concrete reality, a withdrawal, which creates a nothingness that is completely empty and detached from the real objects. On the contrary, it is a withdrawal that

¹⁵¹ See footnote 102.

arrives at abstraction full of richness in its association with the concreteness of the outside world. This position is based on Ehrenzweig's concept of the "hidden order of art", according to which there is a hidden psychic structure that controls creativity and aesthetic experience. This structure, although seemingly abstract to the conscious mind, is very well organized at an internal level and is responsible for the flexibility of the creative ego.

Ehrenzweig associates the concept of abstraction with the notions of "undifferentiation" and "dedifferentiation." When he talks about "undifferentiation", he refers to the static aspect of the unconscious image making. He refers to "dedifferentiation", as a dynamic process during which the ego scans and represses external imagery. Drawing on the concept of scientific abstraction, he writes that it is the "product of unconscious dedifferentiation,"¹⁵² which is the mixture of images that seem incompatible to the conscious perception and cancel each other out.¹⁵³ But abstraction in art, as he notes, seems to function in a similar way based as it is on an undifferentiated matrix from where the "primitive undifferentiation can turn into an instrument of high efficiency."¹⁵⁴ Based on these notions he suggests that abstraction has two aspects:

Its *id* aspect is represented by the libidinous withdrawal from concrete objects, its *ego* aspect by the unconscious dedifferentiation; concrete objects are robbed of their individuality and merge – on an unconscious level – with other images similarly undifferentiated.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵² Anton Ehrenzweig, 'The Child's Vision of the World', *The Hidden Order of Art: A Study in the Psychology of Artistic Imagination*, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1971, p. 19.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

Ehrenzweig discusses abstraction both in science and art in his attempt to understand and analyse the conflict between the structural principles that determine the abstract gestalt and the total (whole) object. By discussing the scientific abstraction he seems to use it as a vehicle through which to explain abstraction in art in terms of the emphasis given to the structure of the abstract gestalt as one that focuses on details, on fragmentation and differentiation.

¹⁵⁴ Anton Ehrenzweig, 'Abstraction', *The Hidden Order of Art: A Study in the Psychology of Artistic Imagination*, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1971, p. 129.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 136.

To cast more light upon this psychoanalytically structured model of abstraction, it will be helpful to give a short account of Ehrenzweig's model of the three phases of creativity. This model is developed from the theories of Melanie Klein about the paranoid-schizoid and depressive positions. I consider this model to be an interesting suggestion about the personification of a work of art, since as Ehrenzweig notes, "the work of art functions like another person, having independent life of its own and with whom we are conversing."¹⁵⁶

The first "schizoid" phase describes the stage at which the artist projects the split parts of him/herself into the work of art. This fragmentation, an unavoidable stage to go through in order for the work to be shaped, is the result of the artist's withdrawal from the concrete objects and the stage of their introjection as part objects that are not perceived in their totality by the artist. This first "schizoid" phase can be associated with the "id" aspect of abstraction. This stage is followed by the second "manic" phase of unconscious scanning of the split parts that initially appear as unwanted elements in the work of art and are still in a persecutory state. The artist's unconscious scanning results in the formation of the work's hidden substructure, where the fragmented elements merge with each other into a dedifferentiated mixture of undifferentiated elements.

In this stage, therefore, all differentiation stops after the inside and outside world begin to come to a whole and all the accidents that might have happened in the making of the work of art seem right. This phase explains better the *ego* aspect of abstraction. In the "manic" phase the fragmentation of the work's surface form is not healed completely and this is the reason according to Ehrenzweig that "the systematic disruption of the surface faculties in much modern art remains partly unresolved in the final result."¹⁵⁷ But despite the partial resolution, the hidden single elements of the work's substructure are still tied together under the *ego's*

¹⁵⁶ Anton Ehrenzweig, 'The Three Phases of Creativity', *The Hidden Order of Art: A Study in the Psychology of Artistic Imagination*, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1971, pp. 102, 104.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 102.

unconscious dedifferentiation into “an unbroken pictorial space that emerges as the conscious signal of the unconscious integration.”¹⁵⁸

Following the “manic” phase, the artist enters the last stage of the creative process, in which he re-introjects part of the work’s unconscious substructure into higher levels of the ego. In this third phase, the undifferentiated elements of the work’s matrix, although unconsciously put together in a dedifferentiated whole, appear chaotic in the conscious level leading to a different type of anxiety. The artist tends to feel this anxiety, not as persecutory as it was in the first phase, but as depressive. He/she perceives the work as not perfectly complete and hopes for its future integration and restoration to a perfect whole. The work of art is therefore first completed internally in an unconscious manic process and then it gradually comes to be realized as a whole complete object at the level of consciousness.

Abstraction, in Ehrenzweig’s account, is therefore a matter of withdrawn undifferentiated, unconscious material, which through a process of dedifferentiation is transformed into an “unbroken” pictorial space. It is obvious that this “unbroken” pictorial space relates to Kuspit’s “unintelligible” surface of modern abstract art. But there is a difference between the two positions. In Ehrenzweig’s case, the abstract incompatible unconscious images that constitute the work’s matrix become gradually readable and during the integration stage of the depressive phase, the artist is capable of seeing his/her work as a finished independent object and to start exploring it from the point of view of a spectator. On the contrary, in Kuspit’s case, the abstract elements of the work’s surface remain unreadable and unresolved in a repressed withdrawn state, since they are seen by the artist as a way of protection against the chaos, loss and disintegration of the world and his/her inner personal lack of emotions. Ehrenzweig’s “unbroken” pictorial space, although seemingly abstract, is full instead of emptiness and reflects the rich process of the unconscious mind that creates the hidden well organized substructure of the work. Thus, Ehrenzweig believes that the origins of abstract art are deeply rooted in the

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

unconscious mind and he suggests that abstraction in art needs and is based on an undifferentiated matrix.

I want to suggest here that Ehrenzweig's understanding of abstraction as a process can be associated with Winnicott's concept of *potential space* as a space that helps to understand the process in which abstraction is generated. The transition through this intermediate space of experience between the internal and external world refers to both abstraction from and vision of/return to reality¹⁶⁰; as a process in which the subject adapts to the perception of his/her external objects as whole and separate.

Having established a framework of theoretical positions around the psychoanalytic resonance of the concept of abstraction in art we can now understand that abstraction can be seen either from an objective point of view or from a more subjective perspective. In its objective apprehension, not only does it spring from reality, since reality is its source of stimulation and its cause, but also it returns back to the external world,¹⁶¹ after an unconscious process of hidden order, in a more engaging

¹⁶⁰ Abstraction as a withdrawn process that refers back to reality can also be traced in Rudolf Arnheim's approach. Arnheim wrote:

We are indebted to Worringer for having pointed out that under certain conditions abstract form can be a symptom of withdrawal, but we can now see that primarily and typically it serves the opposite purpose. Abstraction is the indispensable means by which all visible shapes are perceived, identified, and found to have generality and symbolic significance. For, if I may rephrase Kant's pronouncement, vision without abstraction is blind; abstraction without vision is empty. ... Straightness, after all, is as much a mental trait as the curvature of adaptation and the simple clarity of order is described by Worringer himself as a state highly desirable to the mind.

The above quote can be found in:

Rudolf Arnheim, 'Wilhelm Worringer on Abstraction and Empathy', *New Essays on the Psychology of Art*, Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1986, p. 60.

For more on Arnheim's ideas about abstraction see:

Rudolf Arnheim, *Towards a Psychology of Art: Collected Essays*, London: Faber and Faber, 1967.

¹⁶¹ Arnheim's approach to abstraction as an engagement with reality also has similarities with the approach of various artists and this can be traced in their writings.

Mondrian (1872-1944) expressed the belief that "abstraction is not practiced in order to withdraw from the world but to penetrate its essence." (Rudolf Arnheim, 'Wilhelm Worringer on Abstraction and Empathy', op. cit., p. 58).

manner and objective perception of reality. In contrast with this, if seen from a subjective point of view, abstraction expresses a withdrawn state of the subject's mind (as the maker of the work), remains a repressed level and reveals less about its relation to and significance for the outside world.

1.4.1.3 ABSTRACTION AND EMPTY SPACE – Peter Fuller and Briony Fer

There are a number of art critics and theorists who have employed a Kleinian and Winnicottian vocabulary to analyse and discuss abstraction in specific works of art. In the context of an understanding of abstraction as both withdrawal and as an objective engagement with the external world I will now turn to the criticism of Peter Fuller and Briony Fer on specific abstract works. In these analyses they explore the concept of abstraction as empty space and it is this idea that I will explore in more detail in relation to the problematics of my own practice.

The influence of Winnicott on Peter Fuller's criticism becomes obvious from his analysis of a Natkin painting. Fuller describes in formal detail his responses to and impressions of the painting *Reveries of a Lapsed Narcissist* (Figure 22) by Robert Natkin, which belongs to the series, *Colour Bath* canvases. He felt his experience of the work was "good" and he tried to find "a materialist explanation of the effect the painting had upon him."¹⁶² With his criticism of Natkin he expressed his dissatisfaction with orthodox leftist aesthetics and he came closer to one of "the reasons why aesthetic experience within the terrain of the visual just cannot be

But he is not the only artist who has expressed this thought. The Portuguese painter Vieira da Silva (1908-1992) has also said that "every abstraction emerges from reality." (Rosa Olivares, op. cit., p. 20.)

Likewise, the British sculptor Philip King (born 1934) when describing his abstract work, speaks about it with references to reality rather than in abstract terms. This reference to Philip King is based on the comments of Gillian Whiteley, who led a seminar on abstract sculpture at the Tate Britain. The comments were generated by a video showing Philip King and William Tucker talking about their work. (Gillian Whiteley, Seminar at Tate Britain, 'What is abstract Sculpture?', London, 9 April 2005).

¹⁶² Peter Fuller, 'Abstraction and the 'Potential Space'', *Art and Psychoanalysis*, London: Writers and Readers Co-Operative, 1980, p. 182.

reduced to ideology *tout court*.”¹⁶³ He believed that, despite the ideologically differentiations of the beholders of the Natkin painting, there is a “relative constancy common to all those who enjoy Natkin.”¹⁶⁴ He attempted to “penetrate the nature of that relatively constant core more deeply, first by considering this specific structuring of feeling, the aesthetic effect of painting in its historical context, and secondly by correlating it with certain developments in psychoanalysis.”¹⁶⁵

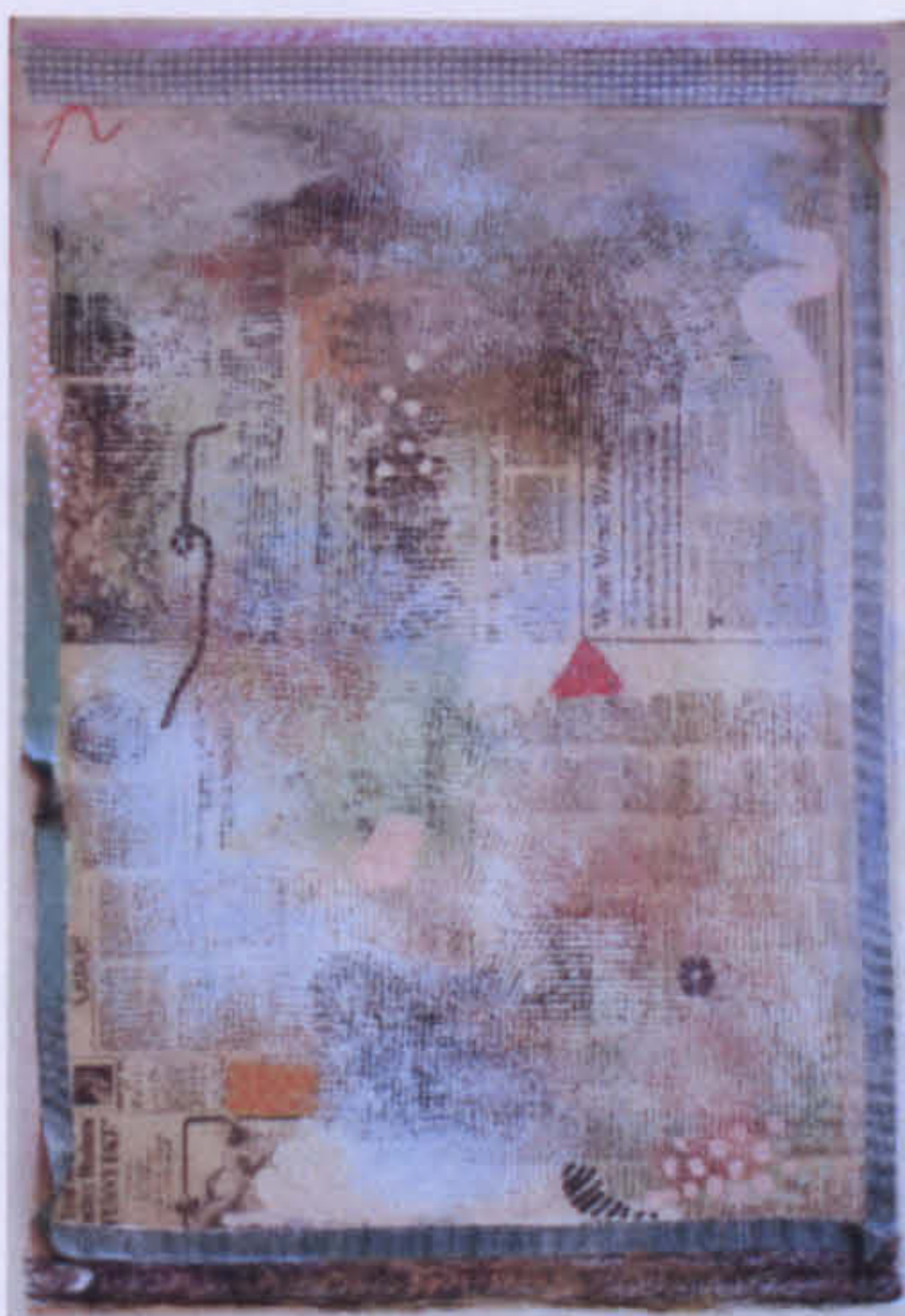


Figure 22
Robert Natkin, *Reveries of a Lapsed Narcissist*,
Colour Bath Series 1976
Acrylic on canvas, 6x4'

In the catalogue for an exhibition of Natkin in the winter of 1974 he wrote:

... The dynamic of our interaction with (Natkin's) canvases took the form of a seduction into an experience where the distinction between the 'outside' and the 'inside' of the picture became ambiguous. The realisation of this simultaneously involved us in a sense of fear, or horror, and tragedy. It may be possible to interpret these events by saying that Natkin evokes a stage in our development when it was difficult to differentiate between "self" and "not self"; when the skin of our bodies did not provide an absolute, concrete limitation to our sense of our physical being; a stage in which we also lacked the sense of time. The reconstruction of that phase in the present turns out to be fascinating, alluring and satisfying – though simultaneously frightening and tragic. By now, it should be self-evident that the stage to which I am referring is that before separation from the mother and her breast. Natkin's painting may in part be seen as an act of reparation for that universally experienced tragedy, an interpretation which is supported by its paradoxically "epic" and "intimate"

¹⁶³ Ibid., p. 183.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 186.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 187.

aspirations. Thus it may be true to say that Natkin's painting recaptures aspects of infantile experience about the nature of time, space, and ourselves which, in adult life, we have been compelled to renounce, defensively, and sometimes to the impoverishment of our perceptions. I am aware that this view may be considered a "wild" or "fantastic" one, and so I put it forward cautiously and somewhat reluctantly. But I do so in preference to stating that in the final analysis we are left with a "sense of mystery" in front of a Natkin canvas. The "sense of mystery" is certainly there, but it, too, must have a material base...¹⁶⁶

Winnicott's ideas underpin the above comment, and explain Fuller's experience of the painting as signaling the transition from the child's fusion with the mother's breast to his/her acceptance of her as a whole object. In other words, Fuller's experience of the non-distinction between the "outside" and the "inside" of the picture indicates the nature of the potential space as an *intermediate area* of experience to which inner reality and external life both contribute. Winnicott states that this area "is not challenged, because no claim is made on its behalf except that it will exist as a resting-place for the individual engaged in the perpetual human task of keeping inner and outer reality separate yet interrelated."¹⁶⁷

In opposition to Natkin's painting, which renders the pictorial space as one that connects with the real world, Fuller also discusses the issue of emptiness in Mark Rothko's¹⁶⁸ paintings. He draws upon the comments of Melanie Klein on the article *The Empty Space* by Karin Michaelis.

Klein illustrates with this article the anxiety she found to be connected with the earliest "danger-situation"¹⁶⁹ in a girl's development. She describes the article as follows:

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., pp. 182 – 183. Read more on Natkin's work by Fuller in:

Peter Fuller, *Robert Natkin*, New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc. Publishers, 1981.

¹⁶⁷ D.W. Winnicott, *Playing & Reality*, op. cit., p. 2.

¹⁶⁸ Jacob Baal-Teshuva, *Mark Rothko 1903-1970: Pictures As Drama*, Köln: Taschen, 2003.

¹⁶⁹ Melanie Klein, 'Infantile Anxiety Situations Reflected In A Work Of Art And In The Creative Impulse', *Contributions to Psycho-Analysis 1921-1945*, The International Psycho-Analytical Library, No. 34, London: The Hogarth Press and The Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1973, p. 232.

In the article entitled “The Empty Space,” Karin Michaelis gives an account of the development of her friend, the painter Ruth Kjar. Ruth Kjar possessed remarkable artistic feeling, which she employed especially in the arrangement of her house, but she had no pronounced creative talent. Beautiful, rich and independent, she spent a great part of her life traveling, and was constantly leaving her house upon which she had expended so much care and taste. She was subject at times to fits of deep depression, which Karin Michaelis describes as follows: ‘There was only one dark spot in her life. In the midst of the happiness, which was natural to her, and seemed so untroubled she would suddenly be plunged into the deepest melancholy. A melancholy that was suicidal. If she tried to account for this, she would say something to this effect: “There is an empty space in me, which I can never fill!’’¹⁷⁰

Ruth’s house was like a gallery of modern art. Her brother in law, a famous painter, had lent her a painting, which before Christmas he took away because the picture was sold. Here Klein lets the author of the article speak for herself, and quotes Michaelis:

This left an empty space on the wall, which in some inexplicable way seemed to coincide with the empty space within her. She sank into a state of the most profound sadness... The empty space grinned hideously down at her.¹⁷¹

Although Kjar had never painted before, she bought paints and filled the empty space on the wall with a life-sized figure of a naked negress. Michaelis ended the article with the description of the last two portraits that Ruth painted: one of an old woman with wrinkled skin, tired eyes and faded hair, the other of her mother:

This lady has a long time before her before she must put her lips to the cup of renunciation. Slim, imperious, challenging, she stands there with a moonlight-coloured shawl draped over her shoulders: she has the effect of a magnificent woman of primitive times, who could any day engage in combat with the children of the desert with her naked hands. What a chin! What force there is in the haughty gaze! ‘The blank space has been filled.’¹⁷²

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., pp. 232- 233.

¹⁷² Ibid., p. 235.

Klein suggests that the “empty space within Ruth” or the “feeling that there was something lacking in her body” has its origins in the “most profound anxiety experienced by girls”; the earliest danger situation which is equivalent to the anxiety of castration experienced by boys. The little girl has a sadistic desire to rob her mother’s body of its contents but this creates the anxiety that the mother will turn to destroy and rob the girl’s body. The girl has introjected the image of the terrifying mother but her fear is reduced by the presence of the real loving mother who then creates a new kind of anxiety to the girl: that the loving mother may be lost and the girl will be left alone. Trying to explain Ruth’s case Klein considered the sort of pictures that Ruth painted: “apart from one picture of flowers, she had confined herself to portraits.”¹⁷³ She concludes her analysis as follows:

It is obvious that the desire to make reparation, to make good the injury psychologically done to the mother and also to restore herself was at the bottom of the compelling urge to paint these portraits of her relatives. That of the old woman, on the threshold of death, seems to be the expression of the primary, sadistic desire to destroy. The daughter’s wish to destroy her mother, to see her old, worn out, marred, is the cause of the need to represent her in full possession of her strength and beauty. By so doing the daughter can allay her own anxiety and can endeavour to restore her mother and make her new through the portrait....The case of Ruth Kjar shows plainly that this anxiety of the little girl is of greatest importance in the ego-development of women, and is one of the incentives to achievement.¹⁷⁴

Peter Fuller, relying on Klein’s text, compares Ruth Kjar’s case with Mark Rothko’s last paintings of black spaces, where there is nothing depicted but an empty black space. He remarks that Kjar managed to overcome her depression by “moving from the blank space to the reconstitution of the mother through art,” while Rothko follows a complete “reverse direction from a portrait of his mother towards absolute emptiness.” He writes:

¹⁷³ Ibid., p. 234.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 235.

In a sense, of course, Rothko's trajectory reproduces within itself not only the development of modernism, but also that of psychoanalysis...He moved from the "objective" world of anatomical study to the "internal objects" of Surrealism, of Dali's (or Klein's) ravaged Venus, towards the positive, undifferentiated colour fields of the potential space, with all its promises realized through transforming colours: but he uncovered there the threat of annihilation, and then the blank psychosis itself which subsumed him. That is the *narrative* of his paintings.¹⁷⁵

He also compares Natkin and Rothko by noting:

Natkin, one might say, traveled back into the "potential space" and found a way, through recreating it on canvas, of "going on being." (Although I do not deny that in his sweeter works there is more than a little manic denial of that which Rothko dared frontally to confront.) Rothko encountered the "absolute primary narcissism" of non-being. Natkin causes us to affirm our potentialities, our possibilities for transforming the world and ourselves. Rothko reveals to us the sombrest and blackest of human emotions. It is not just that, if we are receptive to him, he causes us to, as he put it, break down and cry. He reveals a black hole at the base of consciousness, which is beyond even despair.¹⁷⁶

In summarizing his main points we can assume that Peter Fuller is interested in the role of psychoanalysis in both the creative process during which the artist produces his work of art as an external object coming out of his inner world of internal objects, and the aesthetic experience of the beholder when confronting the work of art. It becomes evident from his writings that the nature and origins of creativity and aesthetic experience, although informed and enveloped by social-cultural-ideological conditions, are rooted in a deeper and more primitive basis; that of unconscious mechanisms and processes which lead to the structure of the ego during the development of the subject. His analysis and interpretation of specific works of art give an insight into how psychoanalytic aesthetics can contribute to the understanding of art and how the notion of part object¹⁷⁷ and empty space can be

¹⁷⁵ Peter Fuller, 'Abstraction and the 'Potential Space'', op. cit. p. 224.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., pp. 224- 225.

¹⁷⁷ On the notion of part object see a Kleinian and Winnicottian approach to other minimalist sculptural works and ready-mades in:
Helen Molesworth, 'Duchamp: by hand, even', in Helen Molesworth, ed., *Part Object Part Sculpture*, Columbus: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005, pp. 178-201.

perceived through that prism. This is especially obvious in his analysis of Mark Rothko's paintings, which depict a potential space of emptiness, as a reflection of the struggle between his internal and external part objects. Rothko did not manage to reverse the trajectory his work was taking. Instead of travelling back in the potential space to reach reality and achieve adaptation by studying the external objects, he withdrew deeper into his empty space of black nothingness, a space that he was not able to fill as Ruth Kjar did. The potential space in his paintings failed to preserve the interrelatedness between his internal and external reality. It only resulted in separateness towards a regressive target.

Briony Fer employs the same story of Ruth Kjar's inner empty space in her critical analysis on Eva Hesse's work as it relates to Minimalism. What Fer finds interesting is "how Hesse's work may bear the marks of the body, or have bodily connotations, without being of the body, and without being symbols in the sense of individual forms standing in for parts of the body."¹⁷⁸ She particularly discusses the shift Hesse made from her work *Hang-Up* to *Metronomic Irregularity II* (Figure 23, 24) and how this shift can be seen from the psychoanalytic perspective as an unconscious symbolic structure. She is also "more interested in how her work embodies an economy of loss in the very procedures it uses."¹⁷⁹ Eva Hesse makes a significant point about her own work:

The formal principles are understandable and understood. It is the unknown quantity from which and where I want to go. As a thing, an object, it accedes to its non-logical self. It is something, it is nothing.¹⁸⁰

Rosalind E. Krauss, 'Object (petit) a', in Helen Molesworth, ed., *Part Object Part Sculpture*, Columbus: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005, pp. 84-90.

¹⁷⁸ Briony Fer, 'Bordering on Blank: Eva Hesse and Minimalism', *On Abstract Art*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1997, p. 109.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 120.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 112.

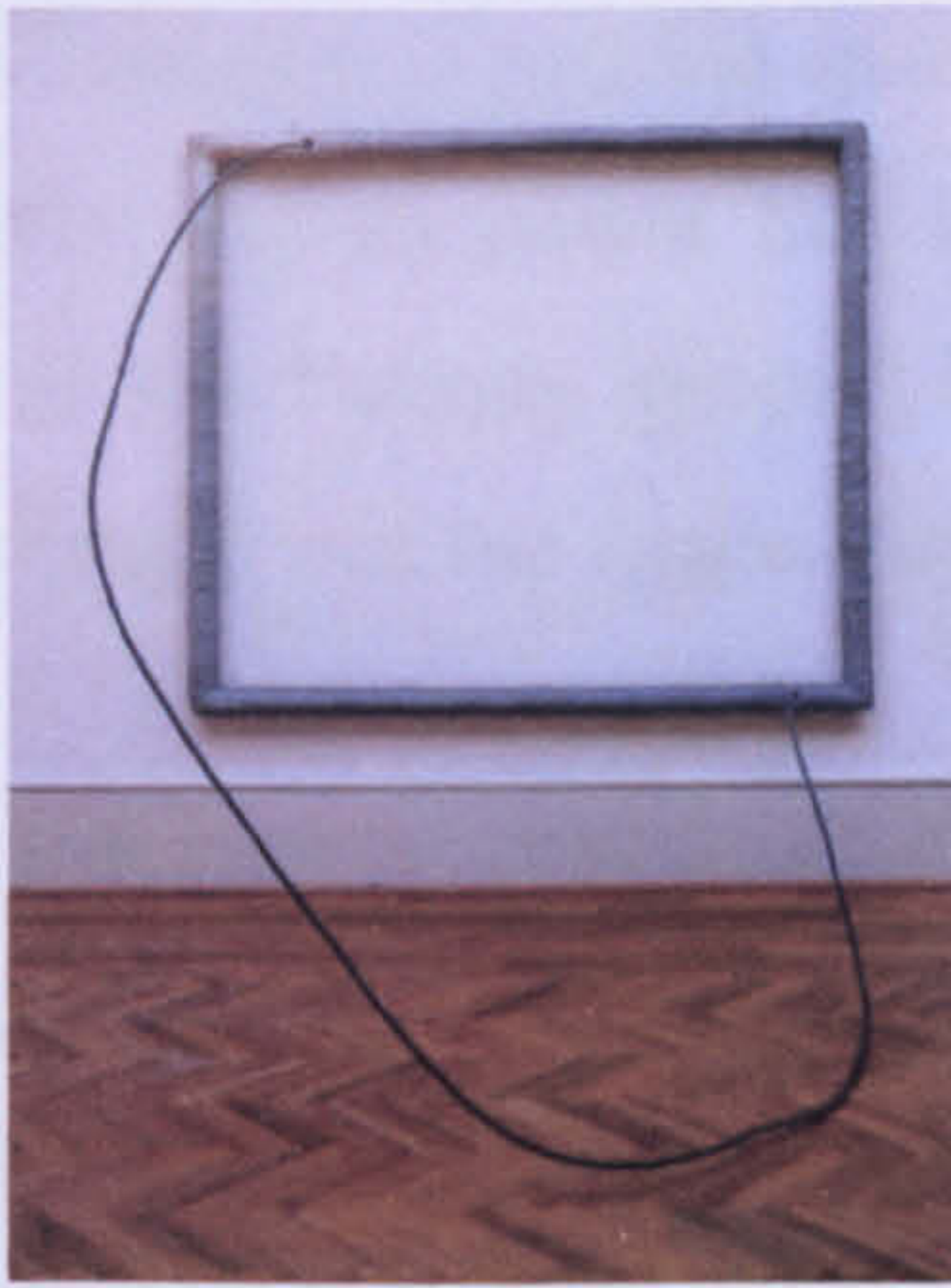


Figure 23
Eva Hesse, *Hang Up*, 1966,
Acrylic on cloth over wood and steel,
72x84x78"

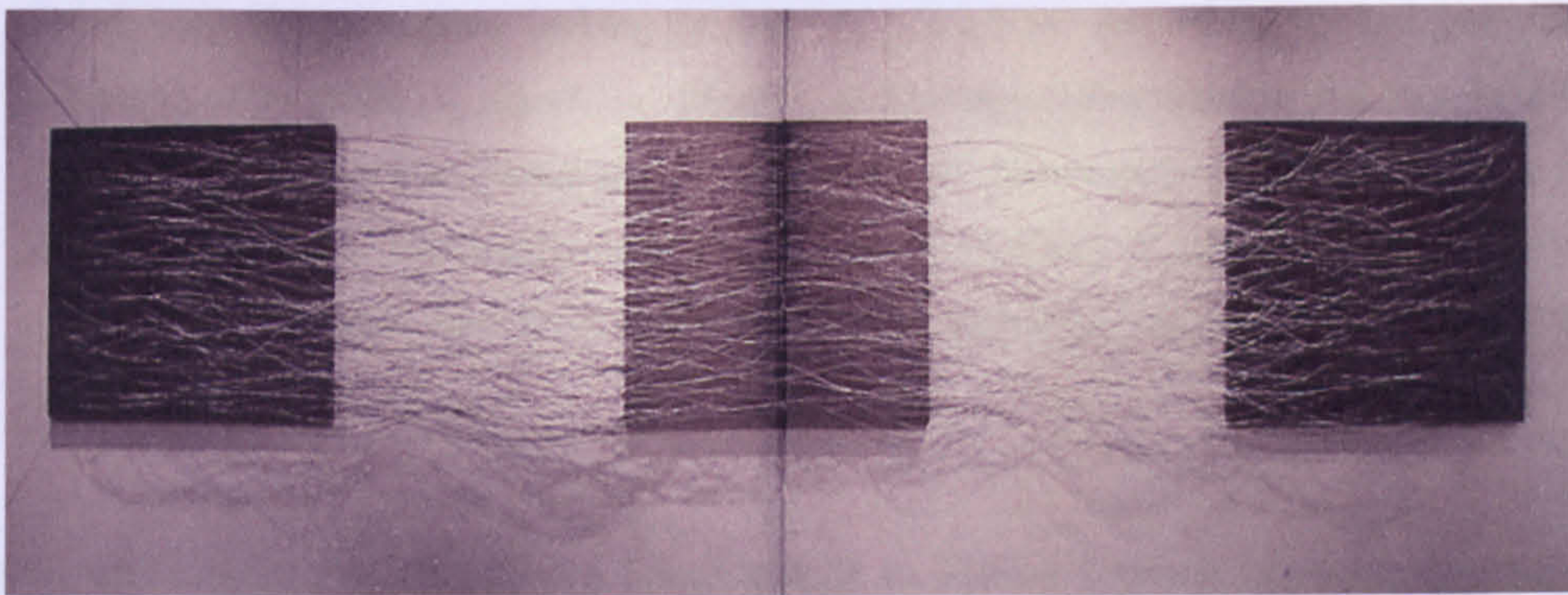


Figure 24
Eva Hesse, *Metronomic Irregularity II*, 1966
Painted wood and cotton-covered wire, 4x20"

Attempting to associate that “non-logical self” and Hesse’s position as a woman artist, Fer turns to Melanie Klein’s explanation of the “blank space” in Ruth Kjar’s story. According to Fer, Klein uses the blank space as a metaphor, which comes to symbolize the internal psychic space before the entry into language. Through art Ruth Kjar became capable of reaching unity and oneness with the world and overcoming the trauma of loss and its sadistic repercussions she felt. Her need and anxiety for reparation of that loss helped her to overcome the depressive position and fill the empty space inside her. In order to understand Hesse’s work, Fer focuses on the metaphors Klein uses in describing Kjar’s melancholic state. As Fer notes, Klein attempts to articulate the melancholy by putting it under the term “empty space.” Melanie Klein considers the “blank space” to be “a metaphor that suggests

both invisibility and lack.”¹⁸¹ Although it is articulated only when it comes into language, it refers to a psychic space prior to language. Thus, it is inside and outside the symbolic and its power lies in that in-between area. The importance of the metaphor of the “empty space” in Hesse’s work is based on the procedure she follows to empty out the space. Analyzing the work *Metronomic Irregularity II* Fer observes:

... the effect is to blank out and obscure; the wires might appear to fill the space, but actually they obscure it, and so leave unrepaired the structure of the gap. And if it is this effect we want to articulate, then by far the most important aspect of Klein’s essay is her description of “something lacking in the body,” which she relates to loss and the mourning of the maternal object. ... Hesse’s work makes a drama out of that loss, in that it is encountered by the viewer as a fraught series of disconnections. The discontinuous lines seem to hover frenetically over *Metronomic Irregularity II*, achieving neither unity nor totality. The back and forth is between desire and loss, the twin poles of psychic life.¹⁸²

Within the context of the above relationship in Hesse’s work between the psychic space and literal space, Briony Fer discusses Michael Fried’s view of the importance of the beholder’s body is distance from the minimalist work. Fried’s position that Minimalist art distances the spectator not only physically but also psychically finds its parallel in Hesse’s art through the discomfiting and bodily disorientating conditions under which the viewer is forced to look at her work. The distorted and discontinuous character of her work creates a distance between the spectator’s body and the sculptural object, which reflects the psychic distance between the external and internal object (or internal body since the internal object is part of the body). This distance is translated into the existence of a gap in the body or else an empty space. Briony Fer speaks about this as follows:

Rather than see a continuity between a literal and a psychic space, there is a discontinuity, a series of displacements entailed in the “perspective of the unconscious.”

¹⁸¹ Ibid., p. 121.

¹⁸² Ibid., p. 123.

That is, the external bodily orientation and the “internal body” do not work in neat unison, but are split. Rather than continuity, which suggests a kind of mirroring or empathetic identification, the emphasis here is on something lacking, some lacuna in the body’s schema.¹⁸³

Fer concludes her criticism of Eva Hesse’s work by stating that what she wants to claim is:

The centrality of that constellation of metaphors that Klein’s essay highlighted, as metaphors which continue to pervade the discourses of modernism: between blank space and a stain, between light and obscurity, between the horizontal and the vertical, between visibility and invisibility, between elevation and a fall. And just as Klein’s blank space supposed sadistic impulses, so apparently restrained surfaces can harbour fantasies of both desire and destruction.¹⁸⁴

Hesse’s work¹⁸⁵ becomes important in terms of demonstrating a psychic space incorporated into a literal space, the literal space of pure minimalist objecthood. The emptiness in her work is presented as an illusionary fill-in-ness,¹⁸⁶ which, as I will

¹⁸³ Ibid., p. 128.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 130.

¹⁸⁵ See also Lippard’s criticism of Hesse’s work in: Lucy Lippard, *Eva Hesse*, New York University Press, 1976.

¹⁸⁶ All the quotes in the following text can be seen in:

Mignon Nixon, ‘Eva Hesse Retrospective: A Note on Milieu’, *October Magazine*, No. 104, Spring 2003, pp. 149-156.

Sharing the views of Briony Fer about the corporeal character of Hesse’s sculptural objects Mignon Nixon writes that her objects “act symbolically without being fully legible as symbols.” The idea underlying her statement is based on Melanie Klein’s account of sublimation in which she explains that “the displacement of libido onto other object and ego activities can be called symbol formation only if we specify that these objects and activities act symbolically without symbolizing anything external to them.”

Nixon brings this matter into focus in the context of speaking about the consequences of the change of milieu of Eva Hesse’s art. “Hesse’s work has been absorbed into other milieus.” By this she means that the instability and insecurity caused to the spectator’s body in viewing Hesse’s objects was replaced in contemporary exhibitions of her work with the discomfort and instability caused to the viewers in enjoying and viewing her art as it was meant to be viewed. Nixon notes:

By altering the milieu of art – by constructing a terrain in which objects appear, or are offered, at unexpected sites, such as the meeting point of wall and floor – Hesse’s work engages the body, as Laplanche suggests culture invades it, saturating it “from head to foot” in a manner that is “by definition intrusive, stimulating and sexual.”

show, is quite the opposite of what my practice is about. Hesse's emptiness, as Rothko's paintings, tends towards a regressive emptiness, a nothingness.

I have tried to summarize here how art theorists and critics have used the Winnicottian and Kleinian psychoanalytic concepts to theorize the effect of emptiness regarding the manipulation of pictorial and literal space in abstract visual and sculptural works and furthermore to show how this formal issue relates to abstraction as a withdrawn attitude from the world or an objective confrontation with it.

Within this framework, she emphasizes the psychoanalytic nature of the corporeality of Hesse's work with the observation that her work by activating an "intrusive, stimulating and sexual solicitation of the body in the cultural domain but also by containing the body," "instigates a dynamic that is structural to the praxis of psychoanalysis."

It seems to me that Laplanche's opinion of the cultural invasion of the body has associations with Kuspit's and Stokes's approach, which claims that the creation of abstract art is motivated by the anxiety the external world causes to the body and therefore to human existence by threatening its integration and its happiness.

Drawing upon Laplanche, Nixon asserts that Hesse's body of work is characterised by an enigmatic proposition that provokes "transference." This transference might insinuate emptiness or fill-in-ness, making it enigmatic to the viewer but not incomprehensible to psychoanalysis. Nixon states:

Transference, for Laplanche, may be "filled-in" or "hollowed-out", may be replete with apparent meaning or as hollow as "the originary infantile situation." What analysis offers, he contends, is to reopen "the dimension of alterity, the unknowability of the other and the self, which is hollowness. Laplanche's spatial metaphors invite comparison with Hesse's. For her art, too, alternates between filling in and hollowing out, but moves inexorably toward the hollow, or in Hesse's terms, toward "nothing."

For an account of how Nixon employs the Kleinian theories to criticize other works of art see: Mignon Nixon, 'Bad Enough Mother', *October Magazine*, No. 71, Winter 1995, pp. 71-92.

1.4.2 ABSTRACTION AS MEDIUM

In this section I will consider an alternative approach to the abstract image, derived from the modernist ideas of Clement Greenberg.

Clement Greenberg is considered to be the most prominent theoretician of the modernist aesthetics since the middle of twentieth century. In his 1960 essay *Modernist Painting* he wrote that:

The essence of Modernism lies, as I see it, in the use of characteristic methods of a discipline to criticize the discipline itself, not in order to subvert it but in order to entrench it more firmly in its area of competence.¹⁸⁷

He attempted to show that modern art derived from within its own critique of itself and from the characteristic use of each medium's methods of working. Writing on the "abstractness" of modernist painting he remarked:

Modernist painting in its latest phase has not abandoned the representation of recognizable objects in principle. What it has abandoned in principle is the representation of the kind of space that recognizable objects can inhabit.¹⁸⁸

With reference to this suggestion, that abstraction is not the negation of representation, Andrew Benjamin proposes that abstraction "is the form taken by painting once the concern of painting is self-definition."¹⁸⁹ What is significant here is the degree of abstraction that the act of defining a medium takes, and not the reduction of the degree of recognizability and representation of an object in how this is depicted on the pictorial space of the painting. It is the medium of painting itself that becomes abstract in its definition, since it ceases to exist as medium, mediating

¹⁸⁷ Clement Greenberg, 'Modernist Painting', in John O' Brian, ed., *Clement Greenberg, The Collected Essays and Criticism; Volume 4: Modernism with a Vengeance 1957-1969*, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1993, p. 85.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 87.

¹⁸⁹ Andrew Benjamin, *What is abstraction?*, London: Academy Editions, 1996, p. 16.

the presence of something else, and starts to exist and stand on its own, as an object with its own integrity and autonomy.¹⁹⁰

In this respect abstraction pertains to the “coextensivity of picture and content,” or the “identification of being and doing,”¹⁹¹ which signifies the simultaneity between the materiality of the painting as object and its meaning. What the work of art does to the viewer cannot be separated from its existence as an object. The specificity of the modernist painting determined the status of abstraction as pure. “Purity”, according to Greenberg, means self-definition, exclusivity and attunement of the medium of painting to its particularity, which is its flat surface. The flatness of the painting introduced to the viewer an optical experience that, as Benjamin notes, presupposes the singularity of the work. This means that the work is experienced “at-onceness”, in a merger of space and time where “a spatial presentation allows for the simultaneity of its being given and received.”¹⁹² The work is given to the viewer, at once separating him from the context of the viewing time and making its content belong to the operation of the artwork and not to the artist. It is the “form of pure interiority” of modernist painting that defines its abstraction. It is the interiority that pertains to the internal operation of the medium itself and not to the artist.

Consequently, abstraction for Greenberg is associated with the autonomy of the artwork paying attention to itself. Concreteness, non-referentiality, self-reflexive medium, flatness, pure opticality, autonomy are some of the most important key notions that characterize Greenberg’s position and theory of modernist art within

¹⁹⁰ For more essays on abstraction, representation and modernism see: David Batchelor, ‘Abstraction, Modernism, Representation’, in Andrew Benjamin and Peter Osborne, ed., *Thinking Art: Beyond Traditional Aesthetics*, London: Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1991, pp. 45-57.

Peter Osborne, ‘Modernism, Abstraction, and the Return to Painting’, in Andrew Benjamin and Peter Osborne, ed., *Thinking Art: Beyond Traditional Aesthetics*, London: Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1991, pp. 59-79.

David Cunningham, ‘Asceticism against colour, or modernism, abstraction and the lateness of Beckett’, *New Formations*, No. 55, Spring 2005, pp. 104-119.

¹⁹¹ Andrew Benjamin, *What is abstraction?*, op. cit., pp. 13, 16.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 17.

this model of abstraction. As Philip Leider observes, the critical reading of Pollock's work proposed by Michael Fried and based partly on Clement Greenberg, shows how prevalent the modernist model of abstraction is. Specifically, he writes about how Pollock's work changed our thinking about painting under the conditions supported by the Greenbergian modernist model:

... how his art broke painting's dependence on a tactile, sculptural space; how the all-over system transcended the Cubist grid; how it freed line from shape, carried abstract art further from the depiction of *things* than had any art before; how it created "a new kind of space" in which objects are not depicted, shapes are not juxtaposed, physical events do not transpire.¹⁹³

In opposition to this stands the literalist approach to reading Pollock and the abstract works that followed (including the minimalist ones) which, as Leider remarks, was formed more from informal conversations rather than as the product of published criticism. Regarding Pollock, his work was confronted by the literalists as the accumulation of "skeins of paint dripped directly from the can."¹⁹⁴ The application of the paint on the canvas was no longer subject to the traditional, controlled method of using a brush to paint a desirable area of the canvas. The paint can also be seen as an object interacting freely with another object; the canvas. Thus, Leider remarks:

Literalism thus sees in Pollock the best abstract art made ever, deriving its strength from the affirmation of the *objectness* of the painting and from the directness of the artist's relations to his materials.¹⁹⁵

The literalist reading of abstraction consists therefore in the encounter of the abstract painting more as an object and less as a flat two-dimensional surface. Its materiality and three-dimensionality are the primary focus of the literalist position. The painting becomes a thing that participates in the artist's strategy of letting his materials

¹⁹³ Philip Leider, 'Literalism and Abstraction: Frank Stella's Retrospective at the Modern', in Francis Francina and Jonathan Harris, ed., *Art in Modern Culture: an anthology of critical texts*, London: Phaidon Press, 1992, p. 319.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., p. 320.

express their strength and possibilities and make the work by themselves. According to Leider, Jasper Johns explored deeply and cleverly the objectness of painting by creating works that posed the question of whether they are paintings or the actual objects they seemed to represent. His work inspired Frank Stella to create a kind of abstract painting that combined the flatness of the abstract painting and the objectness and repetition principle of minimalist works.¹⁹⁶

Minimalists took further the above ideas to the level of pure objecthood, a status of the art work that emphasizes its three-dimensionality and materiality, its shape and size, its order and repetition of identical units, its plain flat colours or as Leider notes:

...the literalist imperatives come from the need to explicitly acknowledge three-dimensionality: structural clarity, everyday materials, directness of relations with the materials.¹⁹⁷

Objecthood is a concept, which according to Michael Fried involves the experience of endlessness and inexhaustibility not because of its fullness but because “there is nothing more to exhaust.”¹⁹⁸ From one point of view this position might seem antithetical to Ehrenzweig’s position that abstraction comprises fullness and contributes to the perception of the objects, but from another perspective the inexhaustibility of objecthood does exactly that. The spectator perceives the object in its wholeness, as it is: a pure objectified form.¹⁹⁹ Consequently, this can be linked with what I suggested in revising Worringer’s model of aesthetics and with his remarks that the desire for self-alienation in the case of empathy²⁰⁰ is fulfilled in the contemplation of organic forms, in the external real objects, as an attempt to negate

¹⁹⁶ See also: Mark Prince, ‘Conceptual Formalism’, *Art Monthly*, No. 299, September 2006, p. 7-10.

¹⁹⁷ Philip Leider, op. cit., p. 323.

¹⁹⁸ Michael Fried, ‘Art and Objecthood’, *Art and Objecthood: essays and reviews*, London: University of Chicago, 1998, p. 166.

¹⁹⁹ Also see: Donald Judd, ‘Specific Objects (1965)’, in James Meyer, ed., *Minimalism: Themes and Movements*, London: Phaidon, 2000, pp. 207-210.

²⁰⁰ The concepts of self-alienation and empathy are generally considered to be opposite but as Worringer has suggested they are not. According to him self-alienation is the common source for both abstraction and empathy. See footnote 77.

the subject's unlimited possibilities and restrict them within the limits of the objects.²⁰¹ Objecthood's inexhaustibility, I wish to suggest, offers the subject a maximum degree of restriction within the limits of an object, which means that since there is nothing more to exhaust, it has reached the absolute point of single form; that is what Worringer's ideal abstract form is about.

The spectator's role in Literalist Art, as Fried likes to call Minimal Art,²⁰² is a very particular one. Discussing and expanding Greenberg's analysis of the "presence" of literalist art, Fried suggests that this presence "is basically a theatrical effect or quality – a kind of stage presence"²⁰³ and "is concerned with the actual circumstances in which the beholder encounters the literalist work."²⁰⁴ Those circumstances involve the work itself placed on the wall or floor and the spectator's body in the space surrounding the work. But it is not only this. Fried suggests that the minimal work "distances the beholder – not just physically but also psychically"²⁰⁵ making him/her a "subject and the piece in question...an object."²⁰⁶ The situation that subject and object are involved in should be controlled by the beholder, as Fried notes, leaving the object to be the centre of focus instead of turning the attention to the role of the spectator. He suggests furthermore that the psychical distancing of the beholder implies the personification of the art work, since it is similar to the one experienced by a person who feels the silent presence of another in the same space. This is what Fried calls "anthropomorphism"²⁰⁷; the work becoming a human entity, which I believe is not very far away from Ehrenzweig's position about the work of art being a person with whom we are

²⁰¹ See back first paragraph on page 29.

²⁰² Also see: Richard Wollheim, 'Minimal Art', in Gregory Battcock, ed., *Minimal Art: a critical anthology*, Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1995, pp. 387-399.

See also for aesthetics and Minimalism in:

Susan Best, 'Minimalism, subjectivity, and aesthetics: rethinking the anti-aesthetic tradition in late-modern art', *Journal of Visual Art Practice*, 5(3), 2006, pp. 127-142.

²⁰³ Michael Fried, 'Art and Objecthood', op. cit., p. 155.

²⁰⁴ Ibid., p. 153.

²⁰⁵ Ibid., p. 154.

²⁰⁶ Ibid.

²⁰⁷ Ibid., p. 157.

discussing.²⁰⁸ The difference in Ehrenzweig's case is that the artist is the one who has a dialogue with the work.

What happens then in this case? What is the role of the artist in the model of abstraction as medium and in its literalist expansion? David Joselit's psychological/cultural approach to this model might give us an answer. Regarding the example of Pollock's work he observes that, as Pollock noted in one of his statements, the gestural method of painting derives from an internal source, "a psychological depth."²⁰⁹ Joselit, by negating the pure opticality of modernism's flatness, suggests that "abstraction functions as a machine for recording the psychological responses of the artist in order to produce (perhaps dramatically different) psychological responses to the viewer."²¹⁰ In this sense according to him, Greenbergian modernism can be described "as a painterly practice in which the artist's unconscious is mortgaged to form."²¹¹

It seems, therefore, that the contribution of the artist's emotional world is kept in a low profile since, as Joselit observes, "Greenberg's cocky advocacy of flatness veils a profound anxiety over the legitimacy of abstraction."²¹² Greenberg speaks of "tautness of feeling"²¹³, rather than depth as the strongest character of post-Cubist art. In this sense, he seems to believe that the purity of abstract art is the transformation of the artist's psychological depth into the optical depth of the flat painting, making flatness imagined, as Joselit notes, "as a density or even an impaction of feeling."²¹⁴ Greenberg suggests that the artist "distrusts more and more of his emotions" in a manner such that these are tautened and compressed in

²⁰⁸ See footnote 156.

²⁰⁹ David Joselit, 'Notes on Surface: toward a genealogy of flatness', *Art History*, 23(1), March 2000, p. 21.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

²¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

²¹² *Ibid.*

²¹³ Clement Greenberg, 'Feeling is All', *Partisan Review*, January-February 1952, reprinted in John O'Brian, ed., *Clement Greenberg, The Collected Essays and Criticism; Volume 3: Affirmations and Refusals, 1950-1956*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993, p. 102.

²¹⁴ David Joselit, 'Notes on Surface: toward a genealogy of flatness', *op. cit.*, p. 22.

their attempt to be expressed on a flat surface. Thus, to recall Kuspit, the pursuit of purity of modern art was encountered as a way of understanding its “unintelligibility,” since the optical abstraction of painting’s flat surface was so enigmatic that it did not allow any insight into the artist’s feelings. But as Kuspit argues, Greenberg makes a distinction between the literal order and the unconscious order of art’s effects, taking a position in favour of the literal order as opposed to the unconscious one, which he considers as difficult to make clear or intelligible.

Abstraction, in Greenberg’s modernism, is thus about the concrete, pure form of painting that refers to itself and its internal methods of making. For Joselit it seems that abstraction corresponds with the cultural/psychological consequences of “visuality.”²¹⁵ He considers abstraction to be the linkage between the artist’s self and the visibility of form, which in turn creates a link between the spectator and the spectacle.

In conclusion, from the deployment of the ideas around the model of abstraction as medium, we can distinguish between three positions in the way they approach this specific model. The aesthetic address of Greenberg’s and Fried’s criticism celebrates practices that emphasize the pure opticality and materiality of the medium as well as its nonreferentiality and reflexivity. They are in favour of the work of art as a self-contained entity that stands on its own regardless of the presence of the subject; either the subject is the artist or the beholder. In contrast with this position, stand two critical approaches that challenged the dominant Greenbergian stance in terms of the relationship between the subject and the object. Those are, as we saw, the psychological/cultural approach followed by Joselit and the literalist approach suggested by Leider.

Having seen how these approaches negotiate the notion of abstraction within the modernist context of ideas, we can now examine how this model relates to the

²¹⁵ Ibid., p. 22.

problem of abstraction in photography,²¹⁶ and specifically how photographic abstraction can be compared with abstraction in the field of modernist painting and minimalism. This comparison presents some similarities and differences.

The area of photographic practice that demonstrates the strongest link between abstract painting, minimalism and abstract photography is the field of conceptual, generative and concrete photography, where the medium's possibilities are explored as an end in itself; to represent photography itself. Examples of photographs that share similarities with abstract modernist paintings, as well as with minimalist influences are those by James Welling and Uta Barth, whose works I will discuss in detail later in my thesis in order to position my own photographic practice. In those works, as we shall see, both subject and object are important in order for the interpretation and understanding of the abstract images to be complete.

In the case of generative/concrete photography, not only the materiality of the surface of the photograph is important but also the whole photograph as a concrete new object, bringing it closer to the minimalist practice in combination with a conceptual input. These kinds of abstract photography enhance the purity and otherness of the medium to the maximum. Abstraction here denotes self-referentiality and autonomy that pertain to the inner functional relations between the operational physical elements of the whole photographic system.

²¹⁶ The modernist ideas of photographic aesthetics were developed by John Szarkowski, who identified five characteristic issues that as he wrote "may contribute to the formulation of a vocabulary and a critical perspective more fully responsive to the unique phenomena of photography."

These issues are: The Thing Itself, The Detail, The Frame, Time and Vantage Point.

More information about these issues can be found in:

John Szarkowski, *The photographer's Eye*, London: Secker and Warburg, 1980.

Also see Ashley La Grange, 'John Szarkowski, The photographer's Eye and Stephen Shore, The Nature of Photographs', *Basic Critical Theory for Photographers*, Oxford: Focal Press, 2005.

Regarding the material existence of the abstract photograph, we recall from Gottfried Jäger that “photography is thus no longer a means of depiction and representation – a medium – but rather becomes an entity, an entity of its own kind – an object.”²¹⁷ He considers abstract photographs as an attempt to become independent and autonomous objects that observe themselves and not the world, with *concrete photographs* of course being the most extreme subcategory of abstract photography and the most obvious manifestation of the possibilities that photography has the potentiality to reveal.

To summarize, a model of abstraction as medium refers, to the detachment of the photographic sign from the documentation of the real and to its transformation into a formal element. Its semiotic focus is now turned in the direction of the inner relations between the formal elements in the pictorial space of the photograph as well as to the materiality of the photograph itself. The image’s status thus oscillates between the space of photographic vision as interpretation of the real and the space of pure opticality that leans towards an abstract painting or an abstract sculptural photographic object. Furthermore, abstraction in its extreme form of concretization, according to Jäger’s position, is the objectification of the pictorial possibilities and the creation of a new object that refers only to itself, a status that brings it closer to minimalist specific objects rather than photographs in their commonly perceived form.

²¹⁷ Gottfried Jaeger, ‘Abstract Photography (2002)’, op. cit., p. 170.

1.4.3 ABSTRACTION AS PROCESS II – The Deleuzian model of abstract machines

Deleuze and Guattari have offered a radically different model that suggests another sense of abstraction that goes beyond the negativity derived from the psychoanalytical model of withdrawal (so far as it sees abstraction only as pure withdrawal), or the modernist negation of figuration and absence of any references to the concrete world. On the contrary, their model supports the idea that abstraction is about the real world and not just pure withdrawal from it. It offers an alternative way of reading abstraction and frees the eye from the tunnel-visioned equation between the *abstract* and the *non representational*. It suggests an “And”, instead of a “Not” as John Rajchman observes in his essay *Another View of Abstraction*.²¹⁸

In the following paragraphs I have attempted to create some possible connections between the ideas of Deleuze and Guattari regarding the concept of abstract machines, Klein’s two psychoanalytic positions and Winnicott’s potential space. If we take into consideration Deleuze and Guattari’s antipathy to psychoanalysis, doing so might seem to contradict my argument so far. However, this is not the case here. I have only borrowed from Deleuze and Guattari those terms and ideas that I found significant in developing my ideas of the way I make use of the concept of potential space to understand the problem of my research. My aim is not to take a critical stance of the position of the aforementioned writers against or in favour of psychoanalysis. Rather, I will expand the models of abstraction, which I have developed so far, and reach a different understanding of the way we think about abstraction, and particularly about abstraction in photography.

I will do this on the grounds of the psychoanalytic understandings of the terms “real world” and “subject”, which I followed so far. I will then enrich these ideas by adding some of the new dimensions that Deleuze and Guattari offer in their writings.

²¹⁸ John Rajchman, ‘Another View of Abstraction’, *JPVA (Journal of Philosophy and the Visual Arts)*, No. 5, 1995.

For this reason, I will give a short account of Deleuze and Guattari's structure of the "subject" and the "real", in order to prevent any confusion between these notions and the psychoanalytically defined terms of "real world" and "subject".

Traditional forms of realism are at odds with Deleuze's philosophy, as James Williams observes. According to his interpretation of Deleuze's work, Williams writes:

Deleuze subverts the concept "real" through his distinction drawn between the "actual" and the "virtual". For him, the actual is more like what we would ordinarily understand as the real, that is, a realm of things that exist independently of our ways of thinking about them and perceiving them. Whereas the virtual is the realm of transcendental conditions for the actual, that is things that we have to presuppose for there to be actual things at all...Deleuze denies any priority accorded to human subjects, to their minds, ideas, perceptual apparatuses or linguistic capacities.²¹⁹

The "real" for Deleuze is, therefore in Williams' account, "the virtual and the actual, it is something incomplete".²²⁰ Similarly, the concept of the "subject" refers to something that is not a "fixed substance",²²¹ neither something given. It is always under construction, as Constantin V. Boundas notes. Boundas also summarizes that the "Deleuzian subject is the provisional outcome of a process of subjectivation. It is an assemblage of heterogeneous elements whose source is not the interiority of the traditional image of thought."²²² The subject does not exist as an individual entity. Its "constitution is a fiction, for the subject is an entity out of joint (cracked). It is defined by the movement through which it is developed".²²³ In this respect, the "unconscious", in Deleuze and Guattari, does not have the same function as in its psychoanalytic account. It is not contained within the limits of an

²¹⁹ James Williams, 'Real', in Adrian Parr, ed., *The Deleuze Dictionary*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005, p. 222.

²²⁰ Ibid.

²²¹ Constantin V. Boundas, 'Subjectivity', in Adrian Parr, ed., *The Deleuze Dictionary*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005, p. 268.

²²² Ibid.

²²³ Ibid., pp.268-269.

individual subject, it is not “an interior locale but a logic according to which anarchic connections are assembled or made”.²²⁴ Based on these presumptions, Deleuze and Guattari form the concept of “desiring machines”,²²⁵ as the one that defines reality. Reality is for them what they call “desiring-production”,²²⁶ which functions as “a synthesis of abstract flows of psychic desire and social labour”.²²⁷ In this context, they see the unconscious as “an effect of the internalization of antiproduction”,²²⁸ and this is where their objection to psychoanalysis lies:

It does not examine the pragmatic relations of power and production at work in the unconscious that might, for example, produce forms of sexuality. It does not properly connect the unconscious to the social field.²²⁹

We can say that Deleuze and Guattari redirect psychoanalysis to a fluid space of eternal movements within things in the outside world, rather than the well defined and fixed structures of psychoanalysis that depend mostly on the operation of the unconscious.

Having clarified under which conditions I will link Deleuze and Guattari to my argument, I will continue my discussion about abstraction by explaining the concept of “abstract machines” and how I make use of it.

Let us first consider how Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari define the abstract line. In *A Thousand Plateaus* (1988) they suggest that art begins with the abstract line. However, in contrast to the geometric or rectilinear line that Wilhelm Worringer considers to be the beginning of art, the abstract line is according to them a “nomadic line”, a “line that delimits nothing, that describes no contour, that is

²²⁴ Alison Ross, ‘Unconscious’, in Adrian Parr, ed., *The Deleuze Dictionary*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005, p. 221.

²²⁵ Ibid.

²²⁶ Philip Goodchild, *Deleuze and Guattari, An Introduction to the Politics of Desire*, London, Thousand Oaks, New Dehli: SAGE Publication in association with Theory, Culture and Society, Nottingham Trent University, 1996, p. 126.

²²⁷ Ibid.

²²⁸ Ibid., p. 125.

²²⁹ Ibid., p. 124.

constantly changing direction and that is as alive as a continuous variation.”²³⁰ Instead of talking about abstraction in opposition to figuration, they suggest that figuration is only one possibility of the abstract line and the “result of certain characteristics of that line when it assumes a given form.”²³¹ In this sense, the abstract line contains many potentialities.

For a better understanding of Deleuze and Guattari’s definition of the abstract line, it is essential to position it within the context of the aesthetic model of “smooth space” of nomad art and its successors, with modern art being one of them. Deleuze and Guattari develop the twin concept of “smooth and striated space”, which they apply to a certain number of different cultural spaces: the technological, the musical, the maritime, the mathematical, the physical and the aesthetic, which is of course the centre of our focus.

I will give a short account of this model of space and I will attempt to relate it to the creativity model proposed by Ehrenzweig and the concept of potential space suggested by Winnicott since I believe there are some important linkages between them that need to be examined.

According to Deleuze and Guattari, there are three couples of adjectives that characterise the “smooth” and “striated” space. “Haptic-optical, close-distant, abstract line-concrete line”²³² are the adjective couples that indicate the antithetical functions of the two spaces. Striated space is formulated by the “concrete lines” of its constituents and is a space of which the viewer can have an “optical” experience and impression since it allows for a “long-distance vision” that requires “constancy of orientation, invariance of distance through an interchange of inertial points of reference, interlinkage by immersion in an ambient milieu, constitution of a central perspective.”²³³ To exemplify this kind of space, in one of their examples Deleuze

²³⁰ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *op. cit.*, pp. 497-498.

²³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 497.

²³² Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *op. cit.*, p. 496.

²³³ *Ibid.*, p. 494.

and Guattari draw upon the formal conditions under which a space is striated and which define the characteristics of the figurative line as it emerges from the abstract one when it assumes a given form. Thus, they refer to the system of rectilinear, concrete lines, where “transversals are subordinated to diagonals, diagonals to horizontals and verticals, and horizontals and verticals to points”²³⁴ and they observe that these lines describe a contour and are representative in themselves even if they do not represent anything.

In contrast to this, a smooth space is a space of “close vision”, which means that it cannot be perceived visually but rather it offers a “haptic” experience, not in the same sense as a “tactile” one, but in the sense that the eye can perform a haptic, nonoptical function. They note that painting is an example of smooth space as it is done at close range although it is viewed from a distance. The desert, steppe, ice and sea are a few more examples of smooth space that are characterised by a continuous variation in their orientations, landmarks and linkages. This means, as Deleuze and Guattari explain, that there is no fixed external observer with a specific visual model for points of reference. On the contrary, they suggest that there are any number of observers, whom they call “nomads” and who experience tactile relations between themselves, since “the whole and the parts give the eye that beholds them a function that is haptic rather than optical.”²³⁵ It is significant here to pay attention to how the smooth space is constituted in terms of its trait of continuous variation, as it will be of great importance to the link I will make later between this space and Ehrenzweig’s concept of dedifferentiation process. Deleuze and Guattari specifically write:

The interlinkages do not imply an ambient space in which the multiplicity would be immersed and which would make distances invariant; rather, they are constituted according to ordered differences that give rise to intrinsic variations in the division of a single distance.²³⁶

²³⁴ Ibid., p. 497.

²³⁵ Ibid., p. 494.

²³⁶ Ibid., p. 493.

Therefore, in opposition to the striated space with a fixed, immobile background, a plane and contour enclosed by its rectilinear, concrete line, the haptic and close vision functions imply the smooth space, which has “no background, plane, or contour, but rather changes in direction and local linkages between parts.”²³⁷ Smooth space is drawn by the “abstract line” which is a nomadic line in terms of its variable directions, rather than rectilinear and geometric ones. Under these conditions the space is not converted into a form of expression that organizes matter. It would be expected that due to its unstable character, the abstract line lacks in a material, symmetrical “form of expression.” On the contrary, Deleuze and Guattari suggest that the abstract line demonstrates “material traits of expression” in the sense that its constant changes of directions imply a status of free action of the line that produces the “power of repetition as a “machinic” force that multiplies its effect and pursues an infinite movement.”²³⁸ We can say that the “material traits of expression” demonstrate an indexical character of the abstract line, which is the material expression of its eternal movement.

This eternal movement is an internal trait of the abstract line as it derives from within the inner functional relations that characterise and define it. It constitutes a central part of the concept of abstract machines since it is obviously the vital force of abstraction in the sense that Deleuze and Guattari consider and describe abstraction.²³⁹

Furthermore, although Deleuze and Guattari agree with Worringer that the abstract line is inorganic, they disagree about the kind of emotional load that it carries. Unlike Worringer who describes the abstract geometric inorganic line as negatively motivated by the feeling of anxiety caused by the subject’s fear for self-alienation, Deleuze and Guattari give their abstract nomadic line a positive motivation and they consider it the “affect”²⁴⁰ of smooth spaces.

²³⁷ Ibid., p. 496.

²³⁸ Ibid., p. 498.

²³⁹ Ibid., p. 499.

²⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 497.

Perceiving the abstract line as the “affect” of the smooth space is seemingly contradictory to its machinic forces, but as Deleuze and Guattari suggest, it “raises *mechanical* relations to the level of *intuition*.”²⁴¹ They believe that the continuous, variable movement of the abstract line liberates an inner strength, an inner power of life free from its confinement in the organic body and free to “pass *between* organisms.”²⁴² They suggest a higher spiritual level of existence that springs from the intuitional level, a deeper immaterial level of existence that is shaped in matter as the material trait of expression of the abstract line. Deleuze and Guattari note that “if everything is alive, it is not because everything is organic or organized but, on the contrary, because the organism is a diversion of life.”²⁴³

How does the “mechanical” relate to the “intuitional”? The “mechanical” relations at the intuitional level consist in the nature of the multiple varieties of movements of the abstract line, which they describe as “streaming, spiraling, zigzagging, snaking feverish line of variation.”²⁴⁴ Through this mechanical intuitional system of variations the abstract line emerges as the line that “passes between points, that is without outside or inside, that is alive as a continuous variation”²⁴⁵ and draws the smooth space as the affect of it, just as the concrete line expressed in the organic representational form draws the striated space.

It is important to note that Deleuze and Guattari see the two spaces as developing an equivalent force between them that impels the one to emerge from the other. As they remark, what interests them are the passages or combinations: “how the forces at work within space continually striate it, and how in the course of its striation it develops other forces and emits new smooth spaces.”²⁴⁶

²⁴¹ Ibid., p. 498.

²⁴² Ibid., p. 499.

²⁴³ Ibid.

²⁴⁴ Ibid.

²⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 498.

²⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 500.

Succinctly, the key points of focus that emerge from the model of abstract machines as developed by Deleuze and Guattari concentrate around notions of movement, change, continuity, diversion, variation, haptic perception, close vision, passage, passage between points, mechanical force, intuition, material expression. What comes into view as a general impression that characterises this model of abstraction is a sense of a mechanical, continuous, flowing, changing motion of the abstract line that takes place in an unconscious, intuitional and spiritual level in the process of achieving material existence and revealing its multiple, diverse and flexible nature.

My understanding of the model of abstract machines in the context of smooth space is that it offers a model of abstraction as a creative, material process where seeing and doing from within a mixture of variations produces multiple potential expressions of the abstract line in its manifestation as a material tactile indication. The mechanical functions that underpin this model constitute its driving force and retain the rhythm of the continuous changes and the pattern of the constant emergence of new variations of the line.

John Rajchman has discussed the relationship between Deleuze's concept of abstraction and Greenbergian modernism. In his essay, "Another View of Abstraction" Rajchman observes that Deleuze stood against all dominant theorization of abstraction as the negation of figuration, the flattening and emptying out of all references of the classical illusionist space and Greenberg's optical puritanism. Instead, as Rajchman remarks, he suggested another view of abstraction that is more "chaotic or formless"²⁴⁷ and which is presented as "an impure mixing and mixing up, prior to Forms, a reassemblage that moves towards an Outside, rather than a purification that turns up to essential ideas, or in towards the constitutive "forms" of a medium."²⁴⁸

²⁴⁷ John Rajchman, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

²⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

Rajchman suggests that the medium demonstrates an opening out from itself, rather than a repressive withdrawal to a status of self-enclosure. Moreover, the medium reaches the point where it becomes “beside itself”²⁴⁹ in a process where “untimely forces announce other new *outside* possibilities”²⁵⁰ and involve a “certain *blindness* that enables a whole art of seeing.”²⁵¹ In this sense, he notes that Deleuze sees an empty canvas not as an empty surface but as one full of “intensity,” which means that it is full of a hidden “virtuality of other strange possibilities,”²⁵² with flatness and figuration as only two of them.

Within this context and taking into account the aforementioned analysis of smooth space and the characteristics of the abstract line, Rajchman identifies two senses of abstraction in Deleuze’s position, which cannot exist separately from each other. The first one is the “Platonic” sense of the abstract “Form”. This type of abstraction refers to the form of the actual real objects and can explain how abstract forms are realised in the world and how they are extracted from it. It entails the idea that abstraction means a transcendental movement towards higher levels of generality. This abstraction seeks to “track down the higher, more general Forms in the lower, more particular things which *participated* in them.”²⁵³ But Deleuze, as Rajchman argues, employs a reversal of Platonism in the context of which he gives priority to an immanent condition rather than a transcendental form. Rajchman writes:

Thus Deleuze draws a picture of an abstract logical space anterior to the divisions and up/down, high/low movements within the great Platonic tree – a space that includes a force or potential which constantly submits its branches to unpredictable, even monstrous variations.²⁵⁴

²⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 17.

²⁵⁰ Ibid.

²⁵¹ Ibid.

²⁵² Ibid., p. 18.

²⁵³ Ibid.

²⁵⁴ Ibid.

Deleuze's space of potentials is linked to the second sense of abstraction, which according to Rajchman answers the question "under what conditions something new or singular can be produced outside the Platonic Forms."²⁵⁵ This second abstraction is the concept of "abstract machines" that presupposes the transformation of "the very idea of *abs-tractus* – the act of withdrawal or turning away."²⁵⁶ Rajchman considers that if the notion of "abs-tractus" is thought to be form withdrawn from matter, then this directly brings up ideas of "possibilities" and their "realisations" as the result of the act of withdrawal. But if it is thought in terms of a world full of multiple divergent paths, then abstract "virtualities" are created. He writes:

But once one allows for a world that is disunified, incongruous, composed of multiple divergent paths, one can think in terms of abstract "virtualities" which, in contrast to the abstract "possibilities", are quite real, even though they are not "actualised." One starts to see the force or potential of things for which there exists no abstract concept, since their "effectuation" would go off in too many directions or "senses" at once. Deleuze calls such *potentia* "virtual" in a sense that contrasts with the "possible" developed by Bergson in his critique of abstractions. Thus the virtual may be said to be "abstract" in a different sense from the possible: unlike abstract "mechanisms", abstract machines are said to be "real although not concrete, actual although not effectuated," comprising a sort of "real virtuality" in things. They have the abstraction of immanent force rather than transcendental form – the abstract "virtuality" within things of other different things, of other "possible worlds" in our world, other histories in our history.²⁵⁷

It is evident that the notion of abstract virtualities within things constitutes a core principle of the model of abstract machines. The immanent forces of divergence and deviation are those mechanical relations responsible for the constant changing of directions that create relations between things and invent new spaces "with original sorts of mixture or assemblage"²⁵⁸ - new "possible worlds in our world." This is the "prodigious And" that Rajchman is talking about. It is an And, it is something more and new that elevates abstraction to a higher level of creation, rather than a "Not" or an end to the process of abstracting.

²⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 19.

²⁵⁶ Ibid.

²⁵⁷ Ibid.

²⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 18.

Abstraction for Deleuze, therefore, is not the absence of figuration and elimination of any story and narrative, but the priority of the immanent conditions within things that have the potentialities for the creation of new abstract virtualities. As Rajchman notes, this is why Deleuze sees Jean Luc Godard's film as abstract; not because of its narrative reduction and its self-referential status but because of the mixing of singular elements in a non-narrative continuity, in an abstract machine that is inseparable from its form.

Rajchman observes that as the abstract virtualities of movement and time in film create its different narratives, in the same manner painting's figuration depends on the dynamic of its pictorial space. Under this logic as well, Deleuze sees Pollock's paintings as the "catastrophe" of the visual. But from his perspective, the catastrophe does not mean the end of the visual. On the contrary, he sees it as an internal force or potential already existing in the pictorial space. Pollock's abstractions invented a new space of abstract virtualities that open the medium of painting to further experimentation out and beside itself, rather than leading it to an end.

Therefore, the idea of "abstractus" is the movement towards an Outside rather than an Inside. It is about creating new worlds within this world. The conclusion to which Rajchman is led is that Deleuze sees abstraction as belonging to "the bodily material world, and its unpredictable "chaosmotic" processes."²⁵⁹ He finishes his essay "Another View Of Abstraction" with the following statement:

For this *world* is what abstraction is all about: abstraction as the attempt to show – in thought as in art, in sensation as in concept – the odd multiple unpredictable potential in the midst of things, of other new things, other new mixtures.²⁶⁰

Rajchman's reading of the model of abstract machines sees abstraction as a machine that processes the unpredictable potentialities of things and creates new relations

²⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 22.

²⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 23.

between them, new mixtures. The abstract machine gives priority to the immanent conditions between things and creates real, actual new mixtures in this world, rather than transcendental forms that emerge as having no connection to this world. The Outside is generated from within and may or may not be figurative. It is generated from an immanent activity of mechanical divergences and deviations in the level of intuition. It is a blind process from within that leads to the perception of the outside whole, but only afterwards. It is a fusion and co-existence of abstract virtualities, which can either become actualised or remain as potential abstractions, but are still real. The abstract machine places emphasis on the process of becoming.

1.4.3.1 CONSIDERING PROCESS - Deleuze, Ehrenzweig, Winnicott

Ehrenzweig's model of the three phases of creativity, with particular focus on the dedifferentiation stage that takes place during the middle manic phase, has parallels to the model of abstract machines as a material process. I consider that the "*impure mixing and mixing up, prior to Forms, a reassemblage that moves towards an Outside*" suggests a similar idea to the dedifferentiated mixture of undifferentiated, incompatible fragmented elements of the work of art's hidden substructure.

As I have already argued, abstraction from Ehrenzweig's perspective is a matter of withdrawn undifferentiated unconscious material, which through a process of dedifferentiation is transformed into an "unbroken" pictorial space. Dedifferentiation is the process that during the manic phase integrates and mixes together all the split introjected parts of the artist and brings them into a whole of undifferentiated elements that form the work's hidden substructure. Dedifferentiation can be considered as the completion of the work at the unconscious level. Abstraction as the result of the mechanism of dedifferentiation takes place in that middle area of manic fusion where the artist is involved in making the work from within rather than seeing it as a whole from the spectator's point of view. Abstraction emerges from within the unconscious level as the undifferentiated matrix of fragmented parts in an order that can not be perceived as such in its movement towards the outside world of consciousness. Instead, the work's orderly

substructure appears abstract and chaotic in the real world. That is how abstraction is formed and functions in the level of consciousness.

The parallel I wish to draw between Ehrenzweig's model of creativity and Deleuze and Guattari's abstract machines relates to the back and forth movements between the smooth and striated space. The dedifferentiation mechanism during which abstraction is generated can be seen as a blind process that takes place in a smooth space and moves towards an outside of a more striated space. The smooth space of abstract machines can be considered as a creative material process of close vision or blind vision. It is a process of seeing and doing from within, as in Deleuze and Guattari's example of painting, before reaching the outside in its full intensity. Abstraction in this context suggests a circular continuous movement between a withdrawal from life's striation to an inner smoother space, revealing its hidden potentialities and creating the conditions for the return to the striated space and reversal. Abstraction then becomes another view on reality rather than a withdrawal from it or transcendence to an immaterial world. Abstraction here means looking and aiming at the external real world by working from the inside to generate new realities in the outside.

I consider that the mixing up of the undifferentiated elements develops in a continuous movement towards various and multiple directions that involve the artist, his introjections and projections during the making of the work, and the work's material response to them. The continuously changing movement is induced by the multiple relations of the immanent forces between the artist, his external and inner world and between the artist and his work to be, or in other words between him and his materials waiting to become a work of art. This mixing up is full of numerous potentialities among the undifferentiated elements that can be realised in numerous abstractions or new realities in their passage from the inner to the external world.

The middle manic phase of creativity is the in-between area that facilitates the passage from the first schizoid phase to the third one which, as I have argued,

correspond with the paranoid-schizoid and depressive Kleinian positions. It is possible therefore to suggest a link between the ideas of Deleuze and Guattari, Klein's psychoanalytic space of the two positions and Winnicott's potential space between those. I wish to correlate the space of functioning of the abstract machines and the abstract virtualities with the *potential space* as proposed by Winnicott.

Recalling Rajchman's proposal that thinking in abstract virtualities presupposes the thought of a world that is disunified and composed of multiple divergent paths, I would say that Deleuze's "*disunified*" world can be considered as the world of part-objects, of not whole objects whose hidden potentialities seek to acquire wholeness through the journey among the "*multiple divergent paths*" or the transition between the paranoid-schizoid position and the depressive position. The transition might be of a dubious direction, a back and forth movement between those two positions that can create many potential worlds, many potential different realities within our reality.

The potential space can be seen as the space of generation of the abstract virtualities, or as the generative source where abstraction springs from. It is the space that creates the conditions that facilitate the movement of abstraction towards the external world. As its name also betrays, the multiple faces with which abstraction reveals itself to the outside are subject to the many potentialities that the relations between the part-objects create. The disunified Deleuzian world is the material world of objects, which through the artist's unconscious mechanism of introjections/projections are transposed into the status of part objects in the creative process that leads to the realisation of the work of art. The unconscious phantasies that are the driving inner force of those mechanisms can be seen as the immanent forces between things that the model of abstract machines talks about. These internal forces at the level of intuition are responsible for the multiple relations between the part objects that produce as a result the abstract virtualities between them. During the creative process they become the artist's transitional objects due to their nature as actual, tangible objects. Because they are neither internalised nor externalised part

objects, they belong, as Winnicott observes, to an illusionary space of playing with the real. Their illusory nature as such is inherently full of potentialities that can be realised in a variety of different divergent directions towards the aim of achieving a status of wholeness in the artwork as a real condition rather than an illusory one. What I mean by the real condition of the object is its status when it does not refer to another object as a metaphor or substitute but only to itself as it is, as an autonomous, separate, whole object that is perceived as such. After it acquires this status, it can then be considered as a transitional object in the context of the potential space of aesthetic contemplation by the spectator.

Then the abstract virtualities of the potential space of aesthetic experience can be multiplied as the work of art is subject to the readings of a large variety of spectators with different repertoire of thoughts, ideas and personal experiences. These spectators engage with the work in very particular ways and have their own interpretations of it.

Again here, the potential space of the aesthetic appreciation of the work implies a continuous movement in a variety of directions. The work as transitional object oscillates in a space of multiple directions and divergent paths between the two kleinian positions of the viewer, between the artist and the viewer and between its own material nature as such and whichever status or meaning it is attributed by the spectator.

The potential space of aesthetic experience as a continuation space of the potential space of the creative process is a psychic space of creation of new abstract virtualities. It is a space whose particular function leads to the invention of new spaces, of new possible worlds in our world as different views of reality rather than abstractions from it. It is the space that shifts abstraction from being a withdrawal

from the external world to being a new concretization of reality.²⁶¹ I speak of concretization of abstraction in relation to the work of art when the withdrawn process of abstraction during the creative process emerges as a concrete abstract form in the real world by acquiring the status of a concrete whole and autonomous object that is perceived as such and implies adaptation to the real world of whole objects.

The Deleuzian model of abstract machines, in association with the psychoanalytic concept of the potential space, can also be correlated with the function of the abstract machine that David Joselit attributes to abstraction and who, as we saw earlier, negates the pure opticality of modernism. By writing that “abstraction functions as a machine for recording the psychological responses of the artist in order to produce (perhaps dramatically different) psychological responses to the viewer,”²⁶² he emphasizes exactly the point I made above about the transition that takes place from the stage of the creative process to the stage of the aesthetic appreciation of the work. The abstract virtualities emerging in the work of art and which are realised with the input of the artist can induce multiple responses to the viewer and create new relations among things as these are perceived and apprehended by the spectator.

It is evident, therefore, that the Deleuzian model of abstract machines can be considered as a useful theoretical tool to help understand both the creative process that leads to the generation of abstraction as well as the abstract form as this is realised in a work of art in the external world. I have expanded this model into one that can be seen as a way of reading some of the most important issues raised in the previous two models, relating to both form and psychology. These pertain mostly to the psychoanalytic mechanisms of abstraction of the subject during the making of a work of art (when abstraction is considered as an engagement with the real world),

²⁶¹ A clarification should be given here as to the phrase “a new concretization of reality”. This is not derived from Deleuze. Rather, it is a link I create between a possible interpretation of his ideas in relation to the function of abstraction within the potential space of aesthetic experience.

²⁶² See footnote 210.

and to the final form of the work in its perception as a concrete object. Here, I will emphasize again the unconventional context, which I set, in order to link some of Deleuze and Guattari's ideas to the psychoanalytic approach to abstraction that I have followed so far. With respect to Deleuze and Guattari's antithetical position to psychoanalysis, and specifically to their view regarding the structure or even the existence or not of the notion of the "subject", I borrowed some of their radical concepts concerning abstraction to open out the psychoanalytic model of abstraction as "potential space", and to add a new dimension to it.

1.4.3.2 POTENTIAL SPACE AND PHOTOGRAPHIC ABSTRACTION

What is now the contribution of this model to the understanding of my particular research problem of abstraction in photography?

In Greek the phrase *Abstract Art* can be translated as *Withdrawn Art / Αφηρημένη Τέχνη (Afeereemenee Tehnee)*. The adjective *αφηρημένος (afeereemenos)*, though, means *absentminded* in English, which characterises a person who is absorbed in something else and who focuses in something inside, in inner thoughts in his inner world.

Additionally, the word *potentia* or *virtual* means *λανθάνων (lanthanon)* in Greek, whose most usual translation in English is *latent*. The adjective *lanthanon* is used to describe the photographic image that is still in a latent condition, in a hidden or potential state of existence before it comes into light. The photograph in that primitive state, when it is still an undeveloped film, is a *virtual image* or a *λανθάνουσα εικόνα (lanthanousa eekona)* in Greek. In this sense, an abstract photograph is an *abstract virtuality* or a *withdrawn potential capacity*. The Greek term for this is *αφηρημένη λανθάνουσα ικανότητα (afeereemenee lanthanousa eekanoteeta)*.

Considering the above ideas, the abstract photograph can be seen as an image with many potentialities or many abstract virtualities, as abstraction is not opposed to the

real any more but is another potentiality of the real, another reality. Its final abstract form is not something transcendental and completely strange to what it has been derived from. Quite the contrary, it is a realized potentiality whose immanent forces withdraw from the real into multiple divergent paths of the darkness of the camera obscura in order to become real again, but in a different new potential condition.

It is worth noticing here that each photograph according to Vilém Flusser is the realization of one of the virtualities contained within the program of the photographic apparatus. Flusser writes:

The photographer is committed to the exhaustion of the photoprogram, and to the realization of all the virtualities contained there. The program, however, is rich and nearly impenetrable. The photographer is committed, then, to discovering hidden virtualities in the program....A well programmed camera can never be wholly seen through by any photographer, nor by all photographers together. It is, in the largest sense, a black box. It is precisely the blackness of the box that challenges the photographer.²⁶³

Having argued that the smooth space of the Deleuzian model of abstract machines is a creative material process of blind vision, I can suggest here that photography can be considered as an abstract machine when it is seen as an act, as a gesture of taking a photograph. In this context, the camera is literally a machine, an apparatus with mechanical functions, a black box that contains infinite hidden potentialities in its program. And it can produce infinite number of images, each one being the realization of one of those virtualities.

In this sense, the abstract photograph can also be seen as one of those virtualities, as the realization of a withdrawn potential capacity of the program of the apparatus. An abstract image is the outcome both of one of those hidden potentialities and of the way the photographer uses the program to achieve the desirable result. It is a matter of contingency depending upon the apparatus or the general system of

²⁶³ Vilém Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, Göttingen: European Photography, 1984, p. 19.

photographic/photosensitive materials and the operator how the abstract final image will turn out. The camera is always alert to follow its operator, who according to Flusser, is a player who sees it as a toy discovering by coincidence and chance new abstract virtualities during his experimentation and play with it. This toy-relationship of the camera to the photographer reminds us again of Winnicott's ideas about playing with reality in the context of transitional phenomena.

The above ideas imply that it is not only the immanent forces from within the program of the photographic apparatus that function in a plateau, in a plane of consistencies and variations, as Deleuze and Guattari remark about the abstract machines. It is also the immanent forces coming from within the unconscious mind of the operator/subject, which invite the camera to generate mechanical relations at the level of intuition of the photographer-artist. Flusser remarks that the photographer is only interested in revealing the undiscovered virtualities of the camera in order to produce new information in a photograph. His interest is focused only on the camera and not on the world "out there." The external world as the object-referent of photography is only the pretext for the realization of new information. Subsequently, the inner forces within the camera program stimulated by the photographer's decisions (based on an alignment between his mind, psyche and body) induce the act of taking a photograph and constitute the driving force to abstraction. In this sense, the abstract photograph is new information produced by the camera program. It is the invention of a new reality, of a new relationship among things in this world produced by the relations between other things. It is not an act of reduction of the object of photography, but rather the revelation of a new face, of a new reality of that object in this world.

In conclusion we can suggest that abstraction has a direct relation to the real world and it is about this world. Any discussion about abstraction cannot be comprehended in its fullness without its reference and attachment to reality, to the external world of actual objects. The presence of objects creates a sense of space, and abstraction is the manifestation of their absence in a different level of presence, still in this world

and not in a completely withdrawn, transcendental²⁶⁴ state. If it was not for the objects, abstraction would have no reason to appear conceptually as a withdrawal from the reality world of objects. The questioning of the presence of the objects and of their in between relations produces the power that leads to abstraction. This implies that abstraction is seen as a transition from an abstract machine of immanent relations between things in the real world to an abstract machine of internal relations of the unconscious. It should not mean an equation of the two processes. It is this transition that leads to the creation of the abstract form, an actual object produced from the combination of inner relations between both unconscious and material things. Abstraction is seen as a withdrawal that moves towards an outside. It returns back to reality as a new presence, as a new real space. The need for withdrawal springs from reality and by practicing it helps to achieve a better understanding of the world. Withdrawing from reality to inner more unconscious states of mind, leads to a more profound realization of the world. It leads to an understanding of its material essence and a realisation of its potentialities, which can create new relations between things.

As far as it concerns photography, it can be suggested that more than any other medium it contributes to our understanding of how abstraction derives from reality. An obvious reason for this comes from its characteristic trait of abstracting pieces of reality by transferring them onto the two dimensional plane of the photograph. A more profound reason lies in the existence of an infinite number of hidden potentialities in this inherent trait of photography. Those hidden abstract virtualities or *new abstractions*, as I would like to call them, await their realization on the two dimensional plane of the photograph as a space where they are organized and emerge in a new form. Even if a new abstraction means reduction on a representational level and the limitation of the field of vision by compressing all the references, it is still another interpretation of reality that derives from it because the object-referent is still there. The real world object, whose light reflections are

²⁶⁴ The word "transcendental" is used here in accordance with Worringer's view, who saw abstraction as a withdrawal, which leads to the creation of abstract forms that are elevated to a transcendental level of existence and function as entities completely separated from this world.

recorded to produce the new abstractions, is still there. It is visually hidden but still existent. It has now a different potential form generated by its original real one. This new form is a new reality and it is perceived as a new material object.

Abstraction in photography can also be considered as a transition through a process of withdrawal from the material world of references to the inner forces of the formal elements on the pictorial space of the photographic surface. This withdrawal takes place within the potential space between the inner and external world. An abstract photograph derives from the desire to control reality, explore its potential expressions and reach its essence. This leads to the creation of abstraction of a higher degree that in its turn leads to the production of a new realization of the potentialities of the photographic medium. It has as a result a new object, a new entity that has been created on the basis of the material objects of this world. This new entity is an autonomous whole object that expands our knowledge about this world of objects. It is the result of the journey through the potential space from the world of part objects to the world of whole objects. It could be said that the utopian desire of the subject to reach wholeness and oneness is realized temporarily and more fully on the surface of an abstract photograph, which due to the loss of its transparency and its apparent detachment from its referent, seems to embody this desire.

This is why an abstract photograph is so difficult to understand. It always carries a paradox within it. Its attachment to and detachment from the real world creates deep ambiguity. The question I pose now is how the ideas explored here can help us to understand the empty space and the way in which we engage with it in contemporary abstract photography.

CHAPTER 2: PHOTOGRAPHIC ABSTRACTION AND POTENTIAL SPACE IN THE WORK OF JAMES WELLING AND UTA BARTH.

The works of two photographers will be discussed for their significance regarding the representation of space in abstract photography and the way they deal with the referentiality of the photograph. The common element in the works of James Welling and Uta Barth is that both construct a new optical reality of a seeming emptiness through the production of abstract images that question the status of the photographic sign and the photograph itself. How the empty space in each of the works relates to the concept of the potential space will become clear in the light of the specific gestural strategies they employ in making the images.

James Welling is an artist who emerged in the mid seventies and his work is characterized by a diversity of choice in subject matter. Although his art in general constitutes an exploration of photographic abstraction, some of his earlier works tend to create confusion around the space of abstract representation as regards the choice of the subject matter, which appears to be rendered in a very representational manner. This is the paradox that Welling's abstraction consists in; it oscillates, as well observed by Sarah J. Rogers, between a documentarian stance that addresses photographic history and the post-minimalist strategies of structure that use the photograph as conceptual device.²⁶⁵ The conceptual underpinnings of his work, in combination with the way he handles the photographic space of representation, register an abstract tendency in his images, which deviates from the documentary truth of their subject matter. In this respect, Welling's photographs demonstrate an ambiguity that presents the photographic sign to oscillate between a referential and non-objective status. This formal, visual ambiguity of abstraction in his work is more evident in some series of images, such as *Untitled, 1980-81* (aluminium foil series) (Figure 25, 26) and *Drapes, 2000* (Figure 27, 28) that depict a seemingly

²⁶⁵ Sarah J. Rogers, 'James Welling: Photographs 1974-1999', in Sarah J. Rogers, ed., *James Welling: Photographs 1974-1999*, Columbus, Ohio: Wexner Center for the Arts and The Ohio State University, 2000, p. 72.

empty space which raises questions as regards the recognizability of the referent on the one hand, and the role that its photographic rendering serves on the other. It is significant, therefore, to examine the importance of ambiguity in Welling's work and how the empty space in his images redefines the space of photography.

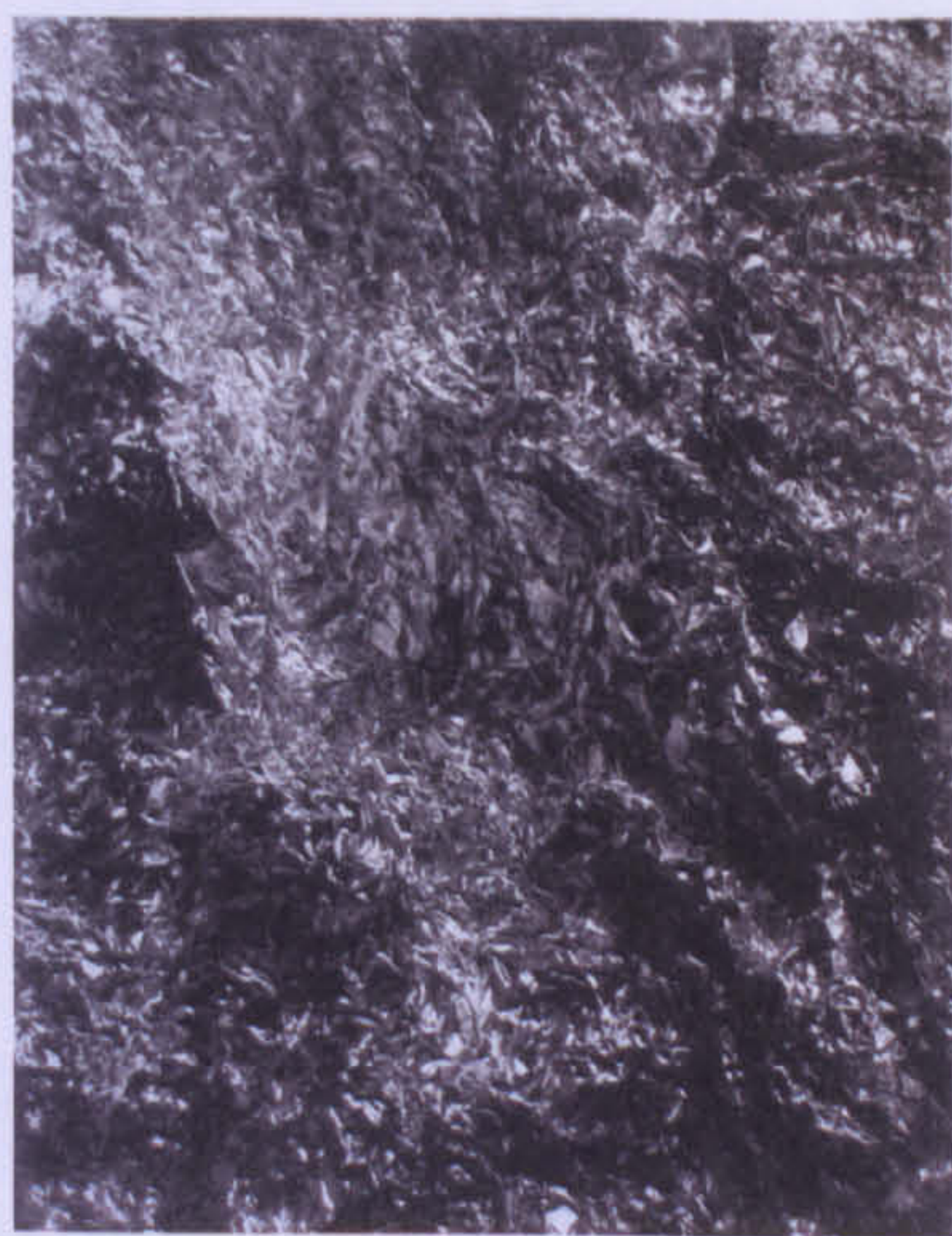


Figure 25
James Welling, *August 16B*, 1980
Untitled, 1980-81



Figure 26
James Welling, *January 8*, 1980
Untitled, 1980-81



Figure 27
James Welling, *I*, 2000
Drapes, 2000



Figure 28
James Welling, *IV*, 2000
Drapes, 2000

The criticism around his work is divided between a modernist and a post-structuralist approach. Michael Fried, David Joselit and Walter Benn Michaels are those critics who followed the modernist approach to understand Welling's abstraction and focused their analysis in highlighting the visual language and the pictorial qualities of his images. Michael Fried, in stressing the simplicity and aestheticism of Welling's art and his continuous concern with how objects and materials manifest themselves in photography, which from its invention aimed at the revelation of reality, considers that his images belong to the "good" side of objecthood.²⁶⁶ His observation was based on his analysis of Welling's *Lock* 1976 that depicts a wooden two-by-four leaning against a wall (Figure 29). Fried does not object to the influence of Welling by Minimalism. He believes that what differentiates Welling's particular way of handling objects from "bad" objecthood, is that his images refer to "the world of real and not generic objects."²⁶⁷ Fried also emphasizes the dark tonality of *Lock*, which derives from a controlled underexposure.²⁶⁸ This points to how Welling manipulates light in a play between darkness and light, with the one radiating from the other, a play that is evident throughout his work. Regarding the *Untitled, 1980-81* series which depict close-ups of a piece of a crumpled aluminium foil, Fried draws attention to the aesthetic qualities of their pictorial space, which "defy the viewer to read back from the scintillating, almost impossibly finely detailed images to the original motif."²⁶⁹



Figure 29
James Welling, *Lock*, 1976

²⁶⁶ Michael Fried, 'James Welling's *Lock*, 1976,' in Sarah J. Rogers, ed., *James Welling: Photographs 1974-1999*, Columbus, Ohio: Wexner Center for the Arts and The Ohio State University, 2000, p. 27.

²⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

Here, Fried speaks in favour of the real as opposed to the abstract literalness and observes that:

Another way of characterizing Welling's focus on the two-by-four might be to speak of an interest in real as opposed to abstract literalness or even in "good" as distinct from "bad" objecthood, understanding by the first term in both oppositions qualities pertaining to objects that can only be revealed or manifested in and by the art of photography...

²⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

²⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

In a similar context of ideas David Joselit refers to the “nonobjectivity” of Welling’s pictures where “the photographic field is hunted back to its constituent elements: light and shadow are unmoored from the contours of any recognizable object.”²⁷⁰ This comment is specifically drawn from his observations on Welling’s aluminium foil series but it reflects the dominant character of all his works which on the one hand suppress the references in favour of light and darkness whilst on the other they enhance the referentiality of the images emphasizing the richness of texture of the recorded materials and objects. According to Joselit, “Welling’s significance as an artist hinges on his multifaceted meditations on the possibility of abstraction in photography.”²⁷¹

The modernist ideas implied in Welling’s photographs are also analysed by Walter Benn Michaels who in his essay “The Photographic Surface” notes that “Welling’s photographs are essentially photographs of some object because they make clear the difference between the surface of the photograph and the surfaces of the objects photographed.”²⁷² An example of this are the images of the aluminium foil, drapery, and diary photographs, where “the foil is crumpled in a way that photograph isn’t; the cloth is folded and the paper is bent or curved.”²⁷³

In opposition to the modernist reading of Welling stands the post-structuralist approach represented by the criticism of Rosalyn Deutsche and Rosalind Krauss who give emphasis to the subject-object relationship. In her essay “Darkness: The emergence of James Welling” Rosalyn Deutsche suggests that the significance of Welling’s photographs was “devalued” by the writings of Michael Fried and Walter

²⁷⁰ David Joselit, ‘Surface Histories: The Photography of James Welling’, op. cit., p. 138.

For the relationship of Welling’s images to painting see:

Philip Armstrong, ‘Artists in the exhibition/James Welling’, in Philip Armstrong, et al., *As Painting: Division and Displacement*, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: The MIT Press, 2001, pp. 172-176.

²⁷¹ Ibid.

²⁷² Walter Benn Michaels, ‘The Photographic Surface’, *James Welling: Photographs 1977-90*, Bern, Kunsthalle Bern, 1990, p. 105.

²⁷³ Ibid., p. 104.

Benn Michaels.²⁷⁴ She is in favour of a more post-structuralist encounter with his images, which “involve the viewer in an ambiguous alternation between abstract and documentary readings”²⁷⁵ or as Rosalind Krauss put it, they “hold the referent at bay, creating as much delay as possible between seeing the image and understanding what it was of.”²⁷⁶

In attempting to understand the ambiguities emerging from Welling’s works, which are “inherent in photography’s opening to light (from darkness),”²⁷⁷ Deutsche speaks of “*threat*” rather than of “*possibility*” as Joselit does. By “*threat*” she suggests “a certain vulnerability to abstraction that underlies representation and subjectivity,”²⁷⁸ which is contradictory to the modernist idea of the invulnerability of the whole, complete, self-contained work of art. Abstraction, in Deutsche’s account, constitutes a threat to photography’s capacity to give a clear image of the world because she sees photography as a figure standing for knowledge and vision of the world. Also, abstraction is a threat for the viewer who becomes vulnerable as well by depending on the image. In this respect, she writes:

What distinguishes Welling’s description of his work as a discourse – use of language to talk about the world- from modernist interpretations of his art is that whereas for the latter photography, whether it is seen as arbitrary or motivated in relation to its referent, is

²⁷⁴ Rosalyn Deutsche, ‘Darkness: The Emergence of James Welling’, in *James Welling: Abstract*, Brussels: Palais Des Beaux-Arts and Toronto: Art Gallery of York University, 2002, p. 10. Here Deutsche writes:

I feel obligated to respond to the way in which such work has been devalued in recent literature about Welling, a devaluation that, as I shall argue, also reduces the significance of Welling’s art. Michael Fried and Walter Benn Michaels extract Welling’s photography from its early context and set up a hierarchical opposition between Welling and other postmodern photographers, describing his work not simply as different from but at odds with and elevated above theirs.

²⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

²⁷⁶ Rosalind Krauss, ‘Photography and Abstraction’, in *A Debate on Abstraction*, a catalogue essay of a series of four exhibits held at The Bertha and Karl Leubsdorf Art Gallery, Hunter College, November 15, 1988 through June 2, 1989, p. 66.

²⁷⁷ Rosalyn Deutsche, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

Deutsche also notes that Welling once explained to her that photography is not the production of an image by light so much as the *control* of light to produce an image –itself a form of control- against the danger of darkness, which haunts photography in the form of both too much and too little light.

²⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

cancelled by the unity and stability of the aesthetic image, the basic premise of Welling's approach is that there can be no stability of image or subject.²⁷⁹

Deutsche's position gives us another view on the matter about the division of abstraction between withdrawal to a pure form and a return to or engagement with the real. We can say that by considering abstraction as a threat to the real Deutsche's approach can be seen to have some relation to Kuspit's position, who suggests that the invulnerability of abstract art stands as a shield against the modern world. In this sense, abstraction as a threat that obscures the clarity of the real can be thought of as a protective shield against the real.

I want to suggest here that what Deutsche calls the "threat" to abstraction can be seen, from my perspective, as another potentiality of the potential space as an aesthetic model of abstraction. Clearly, Welling's photographs draw from both the modernist and post-structuralist traditions. Both contribute to the manifestation of abstraction in an empty space which becomes full in the transition from darkness to light. Particularly in the aluminium foil and drape series the empty space of Welling's photographs lies in the gestural act of folding and crumpling the materials he uses. The function of the fold or the crumpling of the foil can be considered as a conceptual device that Welling uses to comment on the emptiness of the photographic sign. This particular empty status of the photographic sign is questioned by Rosalind Krauss in Welling's work in relationship to how Barthes sees the photograph as the Lacanian "*touché*" (or "*punctum*" with which he replaced the term "touché") which indicates the "missed reality" that repeats itself endlessly.²⁸⁰ In discussing Welling's diary series²⁸¹ Krauss stresses that:

²⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 16.

²⁸⁰ Rosalind Krauss, 'Photography and Abstraction', op. cit., p. 64.

²⁸¹ Ibid., p.17

This work by Welling includes a combination of diary images and landscapes. The title is: Diary of Elizabeth and James Dixon (1840-41)/Connecticut Landscapes, 1977-86. In this series the diary images are placed side by side with the landscape ones. The diary images are close-up shots that Welling took of the handwritten pages of the diary, while the landscapes are images he took of snow-covered landscapes of Connecticut, which was not only the diary's authors' home but also his own home.

The fold was the topological expression of recurrence. And recurrence was understood as a past that becomes present by repetition, as repetition. The fold was also a recess into which light could not penetrate, thus the locus of darkness, privacy, secrecy. A secret (from the past) that comes to light in the present as repetition, producing not a sense of familiarity but a shudder of strangeness, of foreboding – these are the terms of the uncanny.²⁸²

As Krauss observes, this function of the fold is present in other photographs (in which “there is nothing abstract”) of Welling as well, such as those of “draped fabric, gelatine globules, or scattered tiles” and it “set the stage for what it was that Welling wanted to pursue: a photography that would not deliver the present but, by presenting a time warp, put him and his viewers in touch with a past encountered too late.”²⁸³ Krauss notes that photography’s “empty” sign does not become a “full” sign as in modernist visual language but instead it “falls into uncertainty, and silence. We would see the referent but we would not recognize it. We would miss the encounter.”²⁸⁴ It is obvious that Krauss does not link the emptiness of the photographic sign to the non-recognizability or suppression of the referent. On the contrary, she emphasizes that we can recognize the referent. The index is still there and we can still point to it. But what makes the photographic sign “uncertain” and “silent” is that we miss the encounter with the real moment of existence of the referent at the time we view the photograph. Its iconic status, what is represented on the pictorial space of the photograph might have an indexical relationship to the referent, but we do not look at how the referent looks like now. We look at a visual moment from the past that is frozen on the photograph and repeats itself.

In this respect, the function of the fold demonstrates a self-referential character, which, as Krauss remarks, points to the modernist underpinnings of “multiplication of meanings and diversification of the signifieds.”²⁸⁵ But it has a different aim in Welling’s work. That is:

²⁸² Ibid., p. 66.

²⁸³ Ibid.

²⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 67.

²⁸⁵ Ibid.

...the reflexive fold with which Welling is working is focused on generating out of the conditions of photography the experience of the missed encounter: not, therefore, more and more signifieds, but none. And that lack is the precondition for extending the series, for repeating it.²⁸⁶

The feeling of anxiety and loss that accompany the missed encounter with the referent relate to its implied death in the photograph as Barthes suggested²⁸⁷ and as Krauss emphasizes. Welling's empty space implies exactly this delayed encounter with the referent. His photographs are still indexical, as we can still point to the folded drapes or crumpled foil. We can also identify their iconic status. What is represented on the pictorial space of the photographs looks like the folded fabric or the foil. But the iconic status of Welling's photographic sign also pertains to a surface that looks like an empty space. This is what determines the abstractness of Welling's photographs. Their abstract emptiness lies on what the act of folding signifies. That is a delayed encounter with the missed reality, the missed referent. But the act of folding and crumpling that creates contrast between darkness and light signifies, as I wish to suggest, the filling up of this void space with a new reality; the encounter with the reality of the photograph at the time of its viewing by the spectator. Abstraction in Welling's photographs is manifested in the potential space between the folding and crumpling of the referent, obscuring its identity in darkness, and the revelation through this act of a new visuality of the here and now that is suggested by the pictoriality and materiality of the photograph. The empty sign then becomes full as in the "modernist visual language".

It could be suggested that the function of the photograph in this case is its pictoriality but this would not be sufficient for a complete reading of the photograph. It would be sufficient if we were viewing a painting. Abstraction is appreciated on the pictoriality of the photograph only when we are aware of the fact that what we look at is a photograph. It is this knowledge, which always alerts us to look for the referent. As far as we gain an understanding of how the concealment of the referent

²⁸⁶ Ibid.

²⁸⁷ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, London: Vintage, 2000, p. 96.

is manifested on the pictorial photographic space, we can have a complete reading of it. This, though, should not lead to generalizations, that we cannot have a complete aesthetic experience of an image, regardless of the medium, based solely on its pictoriality. What I mean here, is that a deeper understanding of abstraction in Welling's work is established, when we are aware of the function of the potential space in his photographs. The transition between hiding the referent in the darkness of the fold, and allowing it to appear into light in a different form is what becomes significant. The abstractness of the photographs would not make sense without the referent; either the referent is present or it is implied.

Welling in his statements explains that his photographic explorations are an engagement in "a discourse on the world"²⁸⁸ and that "I was looking for things I couldn't quickly decipher."²⁸⁹ His abstraction is, as Deutsche notes, the invention of a system, which Welling called "a machine", that generates the differences between dark and light, between colours, a machine that makes an image and therefore meaning possible.²⁹⁰ The emptiness in Welling's abstraction is generated by this abstract machine, which functions in the context of the potential space of engagement with the world's object and produces meaning out of their handling by means of the photographic medium. Making meaning through abstraction makes the empty space full and open to new possibilities for its understanding and contemplation. The mechanism of the potential space of abstraction in Welling's images is expressed very well in Roger's words when she writes that "he appropriates the traditional documentary conventions of photography but also sees other possibilities within his subjects – the photograph as an abstraction of visual experience or as a technology of visual display."²⁹¹

²⁸⁸ Trevor Fairbrother, 'Interview with James Welling', in Trevor Fairbrother, et al., *The BiNational: American Art of the Late '80s/German Art of the Late 80's*, Boston, Köln: Dumont Buchverlag, 1988, p. 219.

²⁸⁹ Carol Squires, 'A Slice of Light. (artistic photographer James Welling)', *Artforum International*, 36(5), January 1998, p. 78.

²⁹⁰ Rosalyn Deutsche, op. cit., p. 20.

²⁹¹ Sarah J. Rogers, op. cit. pp. 72-73.

This throws more light on the links between Welling's work and my own. We can now understand the act of taking a photograph to be an abstract machine that involves a gestural strategy for the construction of a new optical field of reality derived from a documentation of the world's objects. The missed encounter with the referent or the emptiness of the photographic sign, as indicated by the seeming emptiness of the pictorial space, creates conditions for reparation and fulfilment that are manifested in the transition from the inner to the outside world. That is, from the inner condition of reality and loss of the referent to the creation of a whole, autonomous new object; the photograph as a new object that depicts a new optical reality based on its constituent formal elements and which establishes a context for reflecting on the nature of the medium of photography itself and its possibilities. Also, the internal condition of anxiety felt by the viewer in the struggle for seeking to experience the lost referent finds its reparation in the potential space of aesthetic encounter with the photographs. These finally make sense before the spectators' eyes, not as documents of the missed referent, but as inventions and creations of a new visuality.

A different kind of subject-object relationship is experienced in Uta Barth's photographs. Here, the empty space of abstraction is one which does not refer to any psychological framework of making, despite all the psychologically associated issues her images bring to mind and which she continuously denies, and despite the critiques of theorists who partially ascribe her photographs such reading. Uta Barth's work demonstrates an interest in the conventions of picture making, thus she is interested, as she states, more in what pictures (of the world) look like, rather than in making a photograph that describes what the world she lives in looks like.²⁹² Within this context she uses photography as a medium to question the way we are looking at things and how we understand our perception of the world. Her images are vehicles that help the spectators become familiar and more conscientious about the nature and

²⁹² Uta Barth, 'Artist's Writings: Uta Barth Interview with Sheryl Conkelton, 1996', in Pamela M. Lee, Matthew Higgs, Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe, *Uta Barth*, London: Phaidon Press, 2004, p. 127.

process of their sense of perception. Mark Bolland among others writes that “the central subjects of her images are light, perception and the subjectivity of vision.”²⁹³

Despite the phenomenological character of her work, Barth’s photographs as in Welling’s case oscillate between representation and abstraction and tension and anxiety envelope the viewer who attempts to understand what her images are actually about. The ambiguity created by the play between the recognizable referent and its abstract rendering in a pictorial visual form, often and misunderstandably discussed as “painterly” or “pictorialist”²⁹⁴, is well controlled by Barth who purposefully invites her spectators to experience “confusion on several levels”²⁹⁵ and to realize that “meaning is generated in the process of sorting things out.”²⁹⁶ She states that “I value confusion, a certain kind of confusion that resolves visual and spatial ambiguity.”²⁹⁷

“Meaning is generated in the process of sorting things out” expresses very well how the empty space that emerges in her images, whether implied or directly manifested in the pictorial form, establishes itself as a space full of meaning. This meaning is generated in the process of engaging with the world’s objects in a very particular mode of spatial manipulations through framing, presentation and compositional techniques or strategic gestures. Specifically, in her *Ground* series (Figure 30, 31), the images depict a blurred field of vision which serves as the background in conventional portraiture with the subject missing from the plane of focus. Barth notes about this work that the photographs present “a sort of empty container” which “people begin to project into”²⁹⁸ and find themselves confronted with an empty space which they seek to fill. Here the fullness of her work’s

²⁹³ Mark Bolland, ‘Subject-less Photography’, *Source*, No. 47, Summer 2006, p. 50.

²⁹⁴ Uta Barth, ‘Matthew Higgs in conversation with Uta Barth’, in Pamela M. Lee, Matthew Higgs, Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe, *Uta Barth*, London: Phaidon Press, 2004, p. 19.

²⁹⁵ Uta Barth, ‘Artist’s Writings: Uta Barth Interview with Sheryl Conkelton, 1996’, op. cit., p. 123.

²⁹⁶ Ibid.

²⁹⁷ Uta Barth, ‘Matthew Higgs in conversation with Uta Barth’, op. cit., p. 19.

²⁹⁸ Uta Barth, ‘Artist’s Writings: Uta Barth Interview with Sheryl Conkelton, 1996’, op. cit., p. 123.

emptiness is the result of the empty space between the image and the spectator who is invited to replace the absence of the missing subject in the alleged portrait photograph.



Figure 30
Uta Barth, *Ground #53*, 1995



Figure 31
Uta Barth, *Ground #47*, 1994

The Minimalist influences in her work are very obvious since as Pamela M. Lee remarks, “it is through Minimalism’s acute meditation that the viewer perceives space through actively constructing it.”²⁹⁹ She also remarks that despite the morphological similarities with painting, Barth goes beyond those “in proposing an engagement with painting as a medium both structurally informed and then mediated by the history of photography.”³⁰⁰ Moreover, as regards the abstract character of space in those series that combines both the minimal arrangement of objects as well as the object concreteness of modernist paintings she writes that:

Its space is shallow, approaching flatness, and the minimal interruption of objects in the corner of the photograph draws the viewer ineluctably to the work’s framing conditions. And yet the *Grounds*, as noted earlier, are not framed as traditional pictures are but mounted on thick supports that bear a distinctly object-like quality. The implied passage from the two-dimensional picture plane to three-dimensional sculpture anticipates Barth’s

²⁹⁹ Pamela M. Lee, ‘Survey: Uta Barth and the Medium of Perception’, in Pamela M. Lee, Matthew Higgs, Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe, *Uta Barth*, London: Phaidon Press, 2004, p. 65.

³⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

engagement with the actuality of phenomenal space relative to the photographs, and not just the representation of space contained within the image.³⁰¹

Abstraction in this case lies in Barth's strategy to create a perceptual device by means of a seeming empty pictorial photographic space with object-like quality that is used to perform the relationship between the image and the viewer in an almost always automatic process of looking for the missed referent of the photograph.³⁰² The result of this performance is the recovery of the missing element - the subject of the alleged portrait photograph in the *Ground* series- in the presence of the spectator who seems to make complete and full the process of looking at the photograph. That is how the empty space becomes full in the *Ground* series and indicates that the potential space as generator of abstraction hinges on the transition from the internal relationship between conventions of image making to the external relationship between the images and how these are finally perceived by their spectators.³⁰³

A similar play that requires the active involvement of the viewers in the act of looking at Barth's photographs also accounts for her series of images *In Between places*, *Untitled series 1991-94*, *Field, nowhere near* (1999), and *...of time* (2000), (Figure 32) *white blind (bright red)* (2002). These share one very basic structural element that I consider most important for the purpose of my discussion around the empty space of abstraction. They comprise panels of images, where the gap that separates one photograph from the other is crucial to their reading.

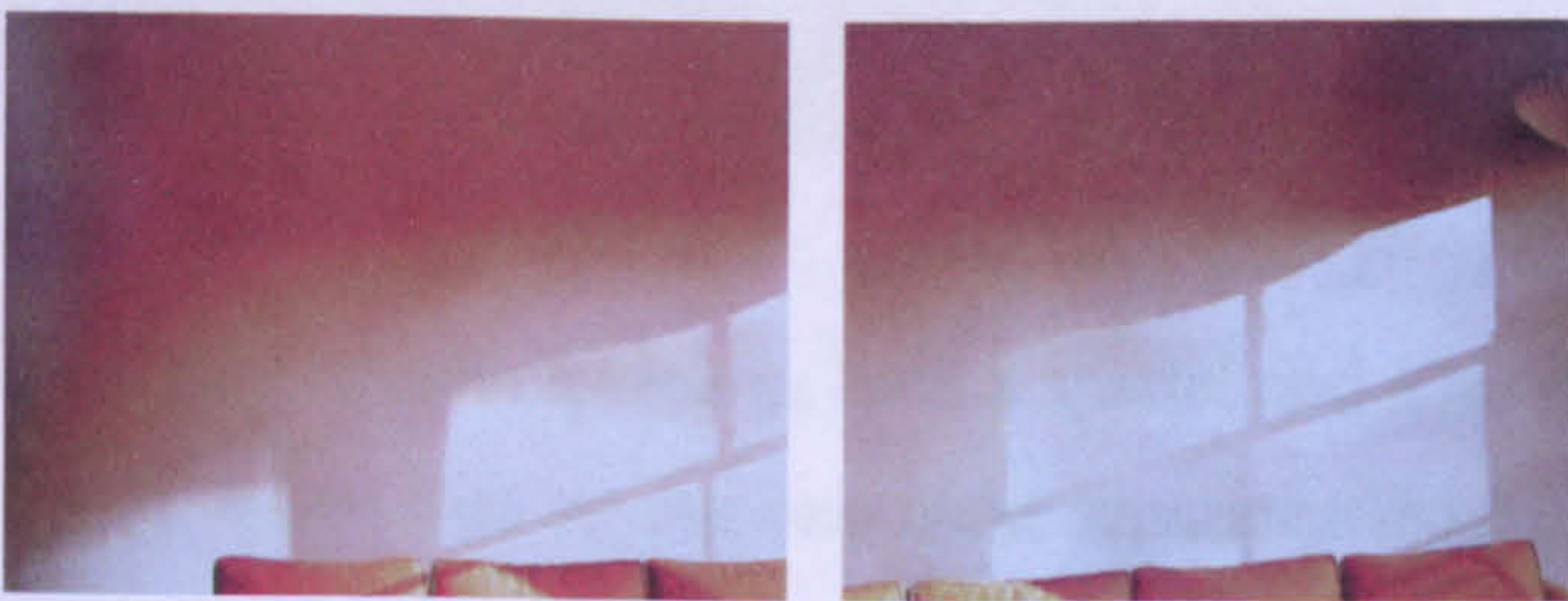


Figure 32
Uta Barth,
...and of time. (aot 4), 2000

³⁰¹ Ibid., pp. 62, 65.

³⁰² See also my previous discussion about Welling's work and the encounter with the missed referent.

³⁰³ For the dialogue between place and image that is present in Barth's works see also:

Sarah J. Rogers, 'Site Seeing', in Ann Bremner, ed., *Evidence: photography and site*, Columbus, Ohio: Wexner Center for the Arts, 1997, pp. 69-82.

Analysing the function of this gap in Barth's *Untitled (98.5)* (1998) (Figure 33)

Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe writes:

While the first two panels are directly adjacent to each other, the second and third are separated by a gap. This is roughly the same width as another panel plus the surrounding strips of wall, but is in fact imperceptibly smaller. The gap device achieves two things simultaneously. By drawing one's attention to the wall, it refers to the space the work shares with the viewer when considered as an object. At the same time it presents temporal duration as at once spatial and irregular. The minute contraction of the space could suggest time lost as opposed to lapsed, indeterminate rather than readily calculable. The gap also creates a moment in which one leaves the world of the image in order to re-enter it at the final panel. In the course of the sequence of viewing, first one sees the rain-smearred surface of the windowpane; then, moving to the second panel, this dissolves in favour of a continuity between the very near and what is on the other side of the glass; subsequently, but not immediately afterwards, one experiences the further dissolution of all separations in favour of a continuity between near and far.³⁰⁴

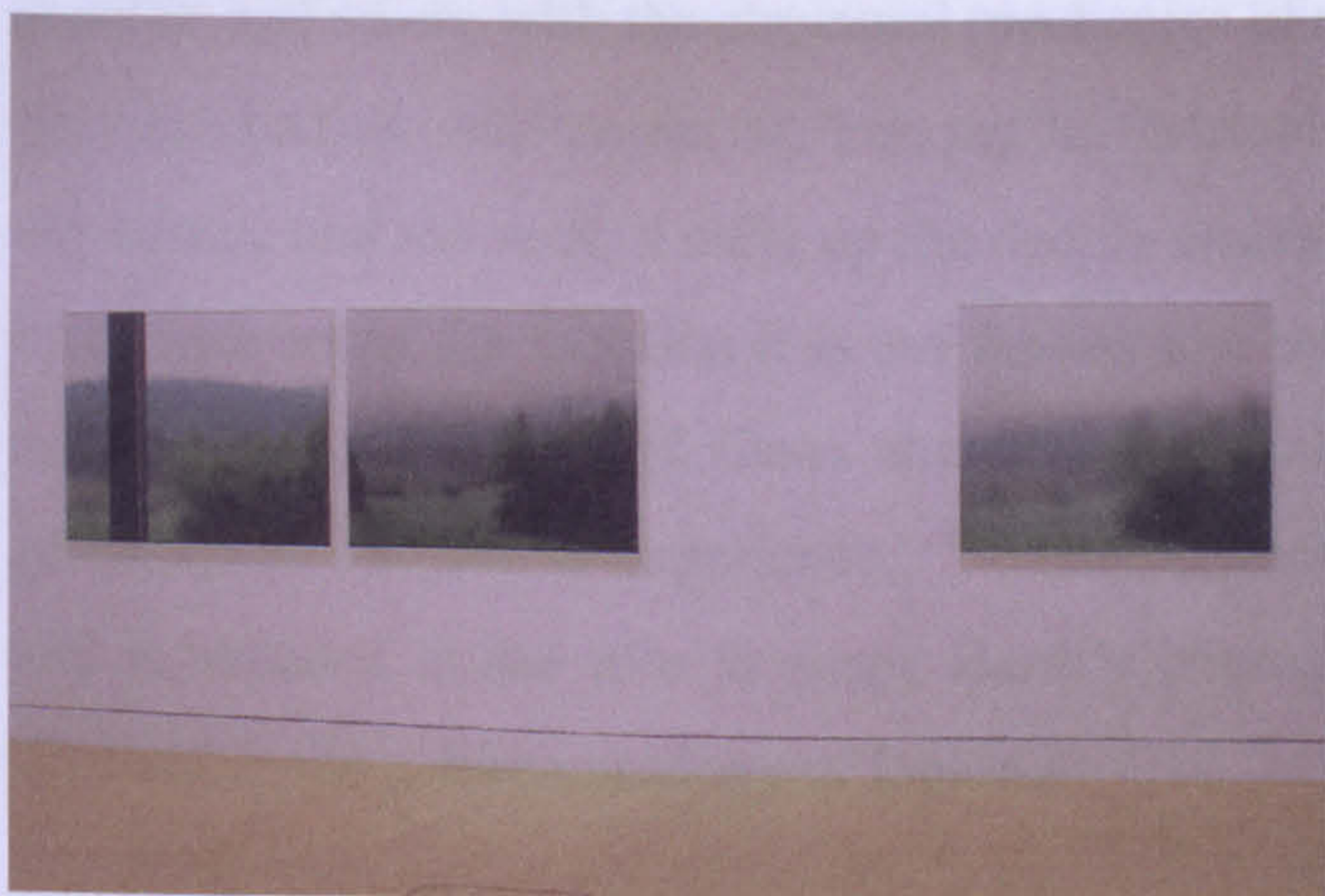


Figure 33

Uta Barth,

Untitled (98.5), 1998

This gap, which represents both a spatial and a temporal vacuum, can be seen as the empty space that on the one hand separates the images and on the other facilitates the perceptual transition from one image to the other in order to lead to the understanding of the panel as a whole, complete piece. In this respect, it is as if the individual photographs function as the internal part objects that ask to be

³⁰⁴ Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe, 'Focus: Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe *Untitled (98.5)*', in Pamela M. Lee, Matthew Higgs, Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe, *Uta Barth*, London: Phaidon Press, 2004, pp.102-103.

reconstructed to the whole external piece that stands on its own. The wall gap can be seen as playing the role of the emptiness in the potential space of aesthetic experience whose need for reparation allows for the filling of this gap with meaning; the meaning derived from the perception of the three parts as one. It is the presence of the photographs here as objects that constitutes the objective reality in relationship to which the process of abstraction takes place. The empty space functions both as a spatial and temporal space of withdrawal from that reality and a threshold that enables the return to reality by achieving the completion of the process of perception.

By employing a model of the potential space to explain the formal and perceptual abstraction in Uta Barth's work, we can understand her play with reality as a play with the photographic reality. In this view the world of photographs are the objects that motivate the play of introjections and projections in the process of becoming familiar and aware with the structural mechanics of vision which is embodied in our physical bodies. As Pamela M. Lee put it, "virtually activating the space between the viewer and the wall, it calls up the deeply embodied nature of visual perception: it reminds us of the fact that it is our *bodies* that see as much as our eyes, and that the will brought to acts of visual attention – the self-consciousness of looking – is grounded in subjective experience."³⁰⁵ The referential world as such is eliminated and is reduced in the role to shape Barth's photographs as transitional objects in facilitating the phenomenology of looking.

Barth's empty space is about the phenomenology of perception with any implied psychoanalytical associations kept unarticulated. In contrast, the empty space in my research project is about the psychoanalytic framework of references that underpin the making of the work and that provide a theoretical platform for the understanding of the formal issues. The phenomenological issues are important but are given less emphasis because they do not constitute the primary area of interest in my research. Nevertheless, the images of my work are strongly suggestive as regards the

³⁰⁵ Pamela M. Lee, *op. cit.*, p. 42.

phenomenology of their empty field of vision since the ambiguity they present is not only the result of the representational versus abstract status of the photographic sign but also of the particular techniques of composing and taking the photographs from an angle of view that gives the desirable visual outcome.

Having addressed the relevance of the aesthetic model of abstraction of potential space to the issues that emerge from the analysis of the works of James Welling and Uta Barth, as well as the way they relate to my work, it is important to stress the relevance of all these works to the problem of abstraction in contemporary photography.³⁰⁶ David Joselit remarked that “by 1988 Welling had established himself as one of the most conceptually inventive photographers of an era characterized by fertile redefinitions of photography.”³⁰⁷

I want to suggest that it is the redefinition of the medium of photography that emerges as a core issue out of the works of these contemporary practitioners including myself. This will become more evident in the following pages about the discussion of my work. By inventing new methods to manipulate the pictorial photographic space, they expand the discussion around the problems raised from abstraction in photography towards a deeper understanding that provides us with new practical and theoretical tools to engage with the abstract photographic imagery.

³⁰⁶ Also see more abstract works from contemporary photographers and essays on abstraction in photography in:

Andy Grundberg et al., *Abstraction in contemporary photography*, Richmond, Virginia: Anderson Gallery, Virginia Commonwealth University and the Emerson Gallery, Hamilton College, 1989.

John Slyce, ‘Sharon Hughes: The index as Still Life’, *Portfolio*, No. 43, p. 61.

Roy Exley, ‘New abstract photography: towards abstraction: the painterly photograph’, *Creative Camera*, No. 358, June/July 1999, pp. 24-29.

³⁰⁷ David Joselit, ‘Surface Histories: The Photography of James Welling’, op. cit., p.137.

CHAPTER 3: ANALYSIS OF MY WORK

How does my practice relate to my theory? How does the whole body of my photographic practice during my research relate to the theoretical issues I have drawn upon so far? Why is my practice important and how does it contribute to the development of the general discourse around the theoretical problem of abstraction in photography? Having discussed in the previous chapters some specific ideas regarding the notion of abstraction in art, as well as its psychoanalytic approach by various theorists and critics, I will now give an account of the problem of abstraction within my own practice.

The main issue in my research has been to analyse how we can understand the visual formal problem of photographic abstraction in relationship to the theoretical issues already discussed earlier regarding notions of interiority and exteriority, and the transition from the unconscious to conscious reality. The formal problem that my practice negotiates is the relationship of the abstract photographic image to the inner world. I develop this through the construction of an optical psychic empty space of abstraction, which questions the status of the photographic image and creates an ambiguity in the attempt to read and contemplate the various issues that emerge from the paradoxical relationship of abstraction to photography.

Driven by a personal interest in the aesthetics of abstract photography and by an inner need to understand my relationship as a photographer to my medium as well as my attitude towards the world through the medium of photography, I was motivated to explore the aesthetics of the abstract photographic image in relation to the inner world. This might suggest the paradox that while on the one hand I am interested in understanding my attitude to the external reality using Photography as a tool, which from the start, is a medium attached to the external world, on the other hand I wish to examine photographic abstraction and its relation to the unconscious.

This paradox, as I have already stated, is exactly the core problem of my research, which I have attempted to resolve to a certain degree by suggesting Winnicott's concept of *potential space* as an *aesthetic model of abstraction*, which I apply both to the creative process during the making of the work and to the interpretation of the visual forms of the final photographs. This implies the use of the psychoanalytic theory of *transitional phenomena* as a methodological tool, which has helped in developing my practice and also creating a framework for the understanding of my work.

The end product of the creative process consists of selected images from the final stage of my experimental practice, which involve the very specific act of performing the creation of a new optical abstract field of reality by means of intervening in the construction of the abstract photographic space. This is accomplished by placing pieces of thread on the the wall that is represented and marking out the space of reality that is being photographed. This set of images forms the practical outcome of my research (See portfolio of my work at the end of this chapter).

How the *aesthetic model of abstraction of potential space* facilitates the discussion of my photographs will become evident when I position them within the context of the three models of abstraction which I developed earlier in my thesis. Considering the multiplicity of ideas that my work has to demonstrate, it can be positioned in an intermediate area that constitutes an amalgamation of ideas derived from all three models of abstraction in a creative fusion with the psychoanalytic concept of *potential space*.

I will start the discussion around the explanation of my work by distinguishing between two areas of analysis: a) the *abstract photograph as potential space* and b) the *abstract photograph as transitional object*. The first refers to the pictorial space of the photographs regarding the internal conditions of the medium of photography, while the second pertains to the status of the photograph as an aesthetic autonomous

object regarding the external conditions of aesthetic experience between the photographs and their spectator.

3.1 THE ABSTRACT PHOTOGRAPH AS POTENTIAL SPACE

A detailed description of my work in formal terms will give an overall visual impression about what it is about; about what it is that we see. The pictorial space of the photographs constitutes an abstract seemingly empty optical field. The formal arrangement of the photographs is developed within a horizontal landscape frame. An empty almost monochromatic surface emerges as the first dominant impression which is enhanced by the flatness of its optical effect. The monochrome of the surface approximates an overall white colour tone,³⁰⁸ which is fused with soft hues of red, magenta, blue and yellow. A closer investigation of the empty field of vision reveals that it is about a wall surface, which quite often is divided into two major smaller surfaces by the corner edge of the wall, which is an indication that what

³⁰⁸ For an introduction to ideas of colour see:

Josef Albers, *Interaction of Color*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1975.

See also: David Batchelor, *Chromophobia*, London: Reaktion Books, 2002.

On ideas about whiteness and monochrome in painting see the following references regarding Robert Ryman's work:

Christopher S. Wood, 'Ryman's poetics', *Art in America*, 82(1), January 1994, pp. 62-72.

Anne Rorimer, 'Robert Ryman', *Dia Art Foundation* [online], 1995-2007, [Accessed: 23 October 2005], Available at: http://www.diacenter.org/exhibs_b/ryman/essay.html

Regarding ideas about monochrome in painting see:

Terry Berne, 'In the age of Monochrome', *Art in America*, 93(1), January 2005, pp. 98-103.

Lisa Florman, 'Piero Manzoni 1933-1963', in Helen Molesworth, ed., *Part Object Part Sculpture*, Columbus : Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005.

Carter Ratcliff, 'Mostly Monochrome', *Art in America*, April 1981, pp. 111-131.

On monochrome and photography see also:

David Green, 'Monochrome art: 'full of things which absorb the light': photography and monochrome painting', *Creative Camera*, No. 358, June/July 1999, pp. 16-22.

seems to be one flat surface is actually the result of two different planes perpendicular to each other that are projected into the two-dimensional photographic frame. This surface separation is also at times highlighted by the prominence of two different hues, which seems to interrupt its uniformity of colour as well as to slightly break the visual impression of its flat effect.

The division of the surface is attained by linear forms that belong to two categories. The first category comprises the vertical or horizontal edges of the wall that constitute at the same time phenomenal lines of separation and connection of the two vertical plane surfaces. These edge lines become more noticeable due to the cracks that the wall surface has to demonstrate as one of the details of its internal conditions and which trace it along the corner edges. The cracks are at times very visible because of the peeled paint pieces that are quite protuberant and at other times they are very subtle, tracing gently the direction of the corner lines or a direction vertical to them towards a more central internal area of the wall surface.

The second category of linear forms refers to the seemingly graphical, black, subtle and quite geometrical lines that appear to be drawn in certain areas within the empty photographic field of vision. I constructed the images in such a manner so that I could render the graphical trajectory of those lines with some subtlety and discretion, aiming at attracting the spectator's eye and leading it into an exploration of the reason for its presence in the empty photographic canvas.³⁰⁹ These lines seem to trace their track by very carefully and discreetly emphasizing their start and end points as well as their intermediate course. Their linear trajectory reveals lines that are vertical, parallel or diagonal to the corner edges intersecting them, beginning from or stopping at them. They also appear to exhibit a rather playful spatial behaviour in relationship to the borders of the photographic frame. Initially, the specific strategy I followed to place them within the empty frame allows them to emerge as though they are the result of a random process, but careful observation of all the photographs shows that this is a very systematic manipulation of the pictorial

³⁰⁹ The word "canvas" is used here in its metaphorical sense.

empty space of the photograph. A very soft shadow behind them, which is visible only in a few of the images, reveals that they are not graphic lines but rather pieces of thread that have been added externally to the wall surface.

Apart from the two categories of lines and the naturally shaped and created cracks, the empty space is also disturbed by the presence of small dust marks and other arbitrary spots, scratches and stains of very small scale. Although the emptiness of the surface is very dominant, all of the above elements, either naturally existent on the wall or purposefully externally placed on it, lead us to ask the question: is this space really empty then? And if it is not, why does it give the impression of emptiness? If it is empty, why does it give the impression of fullness? What is that internal mechanism of the pictorial space that controls and defines the relationship between all the formal elements and makes them give the sense of emptiness on the one hand and fullness on the other? What is the basis of this ambiguity as an optical phenomenon that emerges from the photographs' visuality?

As it is evident already, the description of my work cannot be achieved by focusing only on a formal analysis. This would be all too clear if it were a painting, since during the aesthetic appreciation of a painting the gaze stops on its opaque surface. Inevitably, such an analysis is interrupted but presents a mingling with objective reality in terms that point to the object of reference, to the thing that was there in front of the lens during the act of taking the photograph. The optical ambiguity of the images oscillates between the pictorial formation on the opaque photographic surface and the objective reality, when looking through the pictorial surface at its reference source outside in the real world. In this sense, the gaze oscillates between the abstract photograph as a document of the objective world and the abstract photograph as a pictorial abstract image that leans closer to a painting rather than to a photographic image.

The overall impression that the optical field of the photographs yields is that of a visual tracing within an abstract, empty space where forms take on multiple roles

and they invite the eye to embark on a journey of exploration inside that field of vision. This visual field depicts a new spatial organization by putting forward a new possibility of space that involves the dissolution and collapse of the conventional space into its organization in a new spatial matter; that of the abstract photographic image.

The new emergent space reveals the construction of an architectural kind of structure, of a site that foregrounds the tensions in this attempt to arrange the three dimensional space in the two dimensional frame of the photograph. Apparently, a very strong preoccupation with spatial relationships and how these are projected into the two-dimensional plane emerges as one of the dominant formal observations. The flatness suggested by the images due to the specific light manipulation and the choice of vantage point in the capture of the photograph, as well as their structural organization evoke modernist references of the Greenbergian concerns around the operation and construction of space within a two-dimensional surface that can then refer only to itself and function as a utopian, pure optical space of vision.³¹⁰ Furthermore, the manifest emptiness and underlined monochrome³¹¹ quality, or even

³¹⁰ As a recapping of this idea we can read in Greenberg's words:

The task of self-criticism became to eliminate from the specific effects of each art any and every effect that conceivably be borrowed from or by the medium of any other art. Thus would each art be rendered 'pure', and in its purity find the guarantee of its standards of quality as well as of its independence. 'Purity' meant self-definition, and the enterprise of self-criticism in the arts became one of self-definition with a vengeance.

The above quotation is from:

Clement Greenberg, 'Modernist Painting', in John O' Brian, ed., *Clement Greenberg, The Collected Essays and Criticism; Volume 4: Modernism with a Vengeance 1957-1969*, op. cit., p. 86.

³¹¹ One aspect of Stokes's theory that contributes to the understanding of the monochrome quality of my practice is his perception of colour in painting within the context of the psychoanalytical terminology and his stimulating comparison between painting colour and film colour. In his examination of conditions of colour, he discusses that "inasmuch as colour suggests the quality of what is other or purely spatial, artists whose principal aim is plasticity will make their point partly by forcing their colour to surrender its dominant quality of resistant otherness and to approximate slightly the film colour." Under reduced illumination that separates and distinguishes the outlines and surfaces of objects, that "otherness" resembles the "film" colour. This means that under illumination of low intensity all the colours acquire a greyness that is characterized by differences of brightness, which is an important factor in the exposure of the film to the light in the photographic practice. Within this context the monochrome in my work derives from the luminosity differences of

at times the subtle insinuation of white monochrome, implies strongly minimalist practices of painting. These practices engage with a different manipulation of the spatial relationships; that of the colour form, texture and other properties of the materials used in their every day utilization, or even of the impressions and feelings expressed in material terms derived from certain experiences in relation to the body and psyche or to phenomena of the natural world. Paintings by Mark Rothko, Yves Klein, Lucio Fontana, Robert Ryman, Ad Reinhardt are some examples³¹² of how the forms are treated as changeable vital elements for the organization of the pictorial surface. Abstract forms under the conditions of the minimalist handling of space unfold and spread like a fluid membrane in a variety of directions, shapes and colours that enhance their enormous potentialities.

In this respect the forms in my work spread in a vast, seemingly void space of pictoriality that allows for its internal structural mechanisms to emerge, make their presence visible and be explored. Within this aesthetic framework of perception of the visuality of the images, the emptiness of the surface gives way to a sense of fullness; the fullness of the colour, of the graphically sketched out linear directions and of the surprisingly textural richness of that vacuous space that temporarily seem to cancel out its flat effect. Thus, its minimal structure reveals more rather than less.

The issue that keeps emerging from the images is that of an ambiguity regarding their abstract form. The photographs somehow always seem to cross the boundaries of their abstract context and to enter the world of objects that lies beyond the pictorial threshold, a threshold which on the one hand separates and on the other

the objects which produce the film colour of the photographs. Thus, the monochrome is an abstraction and representation of a real variable outside in the world.

The quotation in the above text can be seen in:

Adrian Stokes, 'Colour and 'Otherness' ', in Richard Wollheim, ed., *The Image in Form: Selected Writings of Adrian Stokes*, London: Penguin Books, 1972, p. 50.

³¹² A general description on how these artists and few others understand and deal with the issue of monochrome as a way to convey fullness and emptiness can be found in:

Mel Gooding, 'Fullness and emptiness', *Movements in Modern Art: Abstract Art*, London: Tate Publishing, 2005, pp. 83-91.

connects the photographic abstraction with the reality world of objects as its unavoidable source of reference. Implicit in this ambiguity that enhances its effect is the notion of the body. The abstract forms of my work invoke the body without however being of the body. They function as containers of the bodily actions³¹³ of my performative gesture in the space of reference during the creative process. They also constitute expressions of the unconscious processes of the mind that took place during the creative phase of making which have manifested themselves through the bodily performance as their material mode of manifestation in the external world of consciousness. The bodily connotations evoked by the forms will be better understood in the following paragraphs where I will discuss the mechanism responsible for the *full emptiness* of the space of the abstract photographs in my work.

The question now raised is about the origin of that enigmatic structure that produces such an ambiguous optical photographic field. All of these questions end in a search for a deeper understanding of this abstract empty space. What is the ultimate function of this space? Why is there such an ambiguity between its abstract qualities and its representational relationship to the objective world of the photograph? What governs the construction of such a new field of vision? Is there any internal mechanism that ascribes it such a function?

Here it is significant to remember how Fuller and Fer theorized and interpreted the issue of emptiness and fullness in the abstract works by Natkin, Rothko and Eva

³¹³ On ideas related to the notion of the body in art practices see: Barbara Howey, 'Self/Painting Practice/Social Practice', *Journal of Visual Art Practice*, 1(3), 2002, pp. 136-149.

David Maclagen, 'Reframing Aesthetic Experience: iconographic and embodied responses to painting', *Journal of Visual Art Practice*, 1(1), 2001, pp. 37-45.

David Maclagan, *Psychological Aesthetics: Painting, Feeling and Making Sense*, London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2001.

Deborah Robinson, 'The Materiality of Text and Body in Painting and Darkroom Processes: an investigation through practice', *Journal of Visual Art Practice*, 2(1&2), 2002, pp. 93-95.

Hesse.³¹⁴ A further analysis of my work will show how a seeming emptiness in an abstract photographic space is filled in opposition to a painterly or sculptural one.

All the confusion derived from the abstract empty space of fullness starts to dissolve when this space is associated with the conditions responsible for its construction and which invest it with a psychic dimension. This empty space of photographic abstraction constitutes a psychic field of vision which refers both to the internal processes of the mind as well as to the external actions of the body as their operator. The linear trajectories of the seemingly graphic marks suggest that the formal organization of the pictorial photographic field embodies the psychological structures of the subject-operator during its creation. The structure of this new space can be better comprehended under the umbrella of the concept of *a potential space*, based on an understanding of the conditions that determine the function of the two aspects of the photographic sign as index and as icon.

In this respect, the aesthetic model of abstraction as potential space provides a rationale for the rigorous horizontal frame of the photographs, which can be seen as framing a landscape of the mind; a space where the mind is expanded from the inner world of unconscious phantasies and mechanisms of projection and introjection of

³¹⁴ Fuller's analysis of a Natkin painting is based on his attempt to understand the feeling of "goodness" he felt during his personal aesthetic experience of it. His analysis implies that the specific painting demonstrates a travel through the potential space which attains to bridge the distance between the "inside" and "outside". That is how Fuller explains the "sense of mystery" with which the pictorial space of the painting envelops the spectator. And that is what I would suggest a sense of fullness conveys to the beholder. It is about feeling full in recapturing, as he says, aspects of infantile experience about time, space and ourselves, thus achieving a link between our inner and external world.

In Rothko's case of black paintings, Fuller ascribes their emptiness a sense of nothingness, which signifies that abstraction here is pure withdrawal to the inner world and a movement backwards in the potential space of experience. His paintings do not reach reality but rather they retire away from it.

Also, Fer's criticism about how emptiness in Hesse's work operates is based on the Kleinian object-relations and the empty space felt in the body by not making amend of the internal objects. Hesse's structural gesture of filling up the space produces a sense of emptiness, rather than fullness. This feeling of emptiness is conveyed to the viewers by the distance they feel when present around her works.

part objects to the outside world of objective reality. The transition from the inner to the external world is the key concept that characterizes the perception of these mindscape photographs because it points to the transition of the photographic sign, from its status as an index in the objective world, to its formal condition of being an icon as the representation of the real. The shift of the photographic sign from its indexical to iconic status can become clear on the grounds of our understanding of the function of potential space in Welling's work, in which the pictoriality of the photograph takes over its referentiality. Similarly, in my work the aesthetic model of abstraction as potential space provides me with the theoretical tool to comprehend abstraction as a transition between the two aspects of the photographic sign.

This transition is ambiguous. The photographs in my work preserve their indexicality but at the same time they suppress it. As icons, they present an indexical relationship to the wall that is represented, but at the same time they represent the wall as an empty space, as a formal element of an empty flat surface. This is how the photographic sign as icon represents the real world; as an abstract form. However, this is not to say that by flattening the photograph or emptying out its references, this loses its indexical character. Abstraction should not be equated with the iconic and representation with the indexical. Abstraction oscillates between those two categories and it can be both at the same time. The reason that might lead to this confusion is that abstraction is apparently more noticeable when the flattening of the space resembles more a formal element rather than an index, an object-referent. This is also true, to mention only a few examples, when the recognizability of the referent is reduced by suppressing the mimetic representation of the reality or when the lack of references points to something abstract, without though implying that the index is not there.

The external relations between the object-referents on the wall, including the wall as such as an object, become internal relations between the formal elements on the pictorial space of the photograph, which emerges as an abstract empty space. Its emptiness, however, is illusory because this space appears to be full. Its fullness

reflects the transition between the inner and external reality, between the pictoriality of the photograph and its referentiality. We can still trace the referent looking through the photograph, by encountering its transparency as a window to the real world. And we can also encounter a new concrete reality, a new object comprised by the pictoriality and materiality of the photograph. Abstraction in my photographs lies in this intermediate space, the potential space, in which the relationship between the index and the icon is performed as a play with the real. My abstract photographs as new objects, would not be able to be produced without the existence of their source of reference; the real world. The function of the potential space in this transition will be better understood in the discussion that follows.

This transition is about a potential movement between two dynamic worlds. The material objective world, modified under the guidance of the *unconscious raw materials*³¹⁵ and desires, presents itself in a dialogue between the inner and the outer. This is between the inner world from which its present form was derived and the outer world to which this form returns and is perceived and experienced. The empty space of abstraction which is seemingly void of any references to the real, is eventually a space of fullness where the photographic sign is not withdrawn to a complete repressed pictorial abstract status, but returns to its source of reference celebrating its potential new form of existence.

The journey of navigation as a visual tracing that this space proposes, suggests an invitation to experience the transitional action in an aesthetic optical journey, where the play of vision between the real and the abstract is the main attraction. This invitation is extended towards multiple and unlimited directions regardless of the given ones that are drawn by myself as their maker. This is just one realizable potentiality of the potential space of the mind onto the potential space of the abstract photograph. By questioning the status of the photographic sign between indexicality and iconicity, between its pictoriality and objective reality, its transitional character

³¹⁵ Here I have modified Kuspit's term of "psychologically raw subject matter", which in contrast to my work's perspective, stands in an unresolved tension with the cultural form. Also see previous footnotes 110, 111,112.

facilitates the visualization of the invisible inner world by means of an ambiguous abstract manipulation. It is through this transition that my abstract photographs share a common ground with the semiotic categories into which Gottfried Jäger has classified the most important genres of photography.³¹⁶ I employ the *appropriation of outer reality*, based on the basic trait of the medium of photography, to *convey the inner reality* by temporarily suppressing the index, as I explained earlier, in its iconic status, thus projecting an inner psychic space into the pictorial photographic surface. This act leads to the *creation of a new reality*, a new possibility abstracted from the conditions given by the creative play of transition from the subjectively conceived world to the objectively perceived reality. The newly generated photographic space of emptiness is only seemingly empty, as if it is an illusionary space, since its void is filled with all the references of reality from which it originally derived. Its illusion, one that causes the photographic sign to ambiguously oscillate between two worlds, can be better understood in the context of its transitional mode of construction, which in parallel with Winnicott's ideas about the *illusion-disillusionment*³¹⁷ function of the potential space, is the illusionary space between those two worlds, belonging neither to the inner nor to the external one. In this respect my abstract photographs result in *reflecting the medium's reality* implied by the final category in Jäger's semiotic photographic classification. Their abstract space proceeds from the *abstraction of the visible* to the *visualization of the invisible*, which then acquires the status of a *concretization of pure visibility* that returns to the start of the circle. They convey a visible external reality, but in a different potential form, as the realisation of a different material object.

³¹⁶ Gottfried Jäger, 'Photographic Semiology/Fotografische Semilogie', in Gottfried Jäger, Rolf H. Krauss and Beate Reese, ed., *Concrete Photography/Konkrete Fotografie*, Germany, Bielefeld: Kerber Verlag, 2005, pp. 250-251.

To recap these, Jäger has classified the genres of photography in the following categories: i) appropriating outer reality, ii) conveying inner reality, iii) creating new reality and iv) reflecting media reality. Regarding the typology of the abstract photographs he has divided them into the three types: i) the abstraction of the visible, ii) the visualization of the invisible and iii) the concretization of pure visibility.

³¹⁷ D.W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, op. cit., pp. 11-14.

We can see a link here with the Deleuzian model of abstraction and the concept of abstract machines that I outlined earlier. The construction of the new optical reality that my photographs present can be perceived as a movement towards an “Outside”³¹⁸, which springs from within, and leads to the creation of new possibilities beyond and besides the medium. Deleuze’s abstract machines give priority to the immanent conditions between things by processing their unpredictable potentialities and creating new relations between them, inventing new worlds within this world.³¹⁹ The empty space of my images can function in parallel to the empty canvas to which Deleuze refers.³²⁰ In this sense, the blankness of my photographic pictorial space is not perceived as an empty surface but is full of intense internal relations between its formal elements, which seem not to reduce their degree of representation and narrative to a complete lack of references, but to create a new abstract narrative based on the mixture of their figurative qualities and their hidden “virtuality of other strange possibilities.”³²¹ This new potentiality of vision generated by my photographs, creates a new space of abstract virtualities that brings them “beside the medium.”³²² This denotes the way in which the abstract virtualities of the indexicality and stillness of the photographic sign produce the conditions for a pictorial site *beside* photography and close to painting to be created. Within this new pictorial space of vision the abstract virtualities of the photographic sign give their place to the optical purity of form and its pictorial laws that govern the medium of painting.

In conclusion, the timelessness that I was seeking to reach in my images is somehow achieved by creating something new; images that suggest possibilities beyond the

³¹⁸ See footnote 248.

³¹⁹ See footnote 257.

³²⁰ John Rajchman, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

Rajchman writes:

And so Deleuze declares the page is never blank, the canvas is never empty. ... to paint one must come to see the surface not so much as empty or blank, but rather as “intense”, where “intensity” means filled with the unseen virtuality of other strange possibilities – one must become blind enough to see the surface as “mixed” or “assembled” in a particular transformable and deformable manner, rather than as just “flat.” One can then see abstraction not as elimination of figure or story, but rather as an invention of other spaces with original sorts of mixture or assemblage...

³²¹ See footnote 252.

³²² See footnote 249.

medium of photography. A diachronic value would equip them with resistance in time regarding the iconography of their pictorial surface in relation to the period of their making, and their status within the context of other contemporary images of similar genre. The concept of “abstract machines” describes the immanent mechanical forces of divergence and deviation, responsible for the constant changing of directions of the relations between things. It is this useful in that not only does it apply to the internal relations between aspects of the photographic sign, but also to the mechanical function of the camera itself as the apparatus and the bodily performative motion gestures of myself as the artist operator of the work. Abstraction in my images therefore reaches the outside from a withdrawn turn to the inside and to the immanent forces between things. The abstraction refers not only to the unpredictable and transitional directions of the aspects of the photographic sign but also to the whole process of the act of taking a photograph, which involves the apparatus and the operator as well as all the agents from the photographic system that contribute with their own immanent forces. All of these elements, that contribute in their internal multiple directional forces to the formation of the empty space of abstraction, also constitute all those *part elements*, which have their part in the creativity process of photographically playing with the reality. They constitute the undifferentiated matrix of fragmented parts, that during the main phase of creativity are involved in the mechanism of dedifferentiation, which is the generative mechanism of abstraction of the “unbroken” pictorial space of the photographs.

As I have already explained, the dedifferentiation mechanism of generation of abstraction takes place within the smooth space of abstract machines and suggests a movement between a withdrawal from life’s striation to an inner smoother space revealing its hidden potentialities and creating the conditions for the return to the striated space.³²³

³²³ According to my understanding of Deleuze and Guattaris’ writings this is how the movement between a smooth and striated space operates. They write:

What interests us in operations of striation and smoothing are precisely the passages or combinations: how the forces at work within space continually striate it, and how in the course of its striation it develops other forces and emits new smooth space.

The new potential optical space I construct in my images can be seen as a fusion of an inner space with the possibility of a new real one. The line that draws this space of abstraction is both abstract and concrete, both abstract and figurative. It is a line that does not negate representation, just as Deleuze does not see abstraction as the negation of figuration.³²⁴ Although the geometrical characteristics of the line that draws my abstract space are more dominant in comparison with Deleuze's abstract line, which is mostly chaotic, my line reveals a hidden chaos through the sense of orderly structure and stability that it attempts to create. It is a transitional line with many hidden potentialities that spring from within. Although it is partially abstract, it does not fully imply the emptiness of the photographic sign. It does not reduce it to a complete opaque formal element. It is an illusory line that implies the "working through" of the potential space between the unconscious and external reality, between photography's transparent reality and photography's ability to represent that reality in a new potential manner full of multiple abstract virtualities or new realities as I would like them to be considered, or even as new abstractions. The construction of this particular optical reality is only one from the unpredictable number of abstract virtualities that the medium of photography has the capacity to demonstrate. Furthermore, this new photographic reality, as such, is full of other hidden potentialities, which wait to be discovered and explored regardless of my personal involvement as their maker-operator. In this respect, the new abstraction represented by my images demonstrates the passing through the potential space of myself as the artist subject, and leads to the creation of a new realizable object, one which then stands alone as an autonomous object demonstrating the internal conditions of the medium of photography. Moreover it stands as a transitional object between the inner world of the spectator and his/her own personal perception of external reality, as well as between him/her and myself as the artist of the work. Also, it stands as a transitional object between myself in the role of the beholder and my external world of objective perception.

This quotation is from: Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *op. cit.* p. 500.

³²⁴ See footnote 231.

The ambiguous outcome that the abstract form of my work suggests is that the concept of photographic abstraction is not, as is often thought, about the transcendence of form and its withdrawal to something completely enigmatic and unintelligible. Abstraction, as it emerges from my photographs, derives from the real world of object references and returns back to it again after a transitional journey of creative “playing with the real” in an intermediate area between the inner and the outside. Its circular trajectory is responsible for attributing to this illusionary empty space the sense of fullness, a return to the external space of reality, which cannot be perceived as such without the spatial relations between its objects that constitute its fullness and wholeness. This return to the real is enhanced by the creation and presence of my photographs as new real material objects that contribute with their own properties to the multiple relations between them and the other world objects.

I have attempted to create a bridge here between my argument and the *abstract photograph as transitional object*, regarding the status of my photographs as new actual objects subject to the aesthetic experience of the spectator. The discussion of my images within this context will make clear how the aesthetic model of abstraction as the potential space provides a way of understanding the status of my photographs as objects, and consequently how this contributes to the general understanding of the problem of abstraction in photography.

3.2 THE ABSTRACT PHOTOGRAPH AS TRANSITIONAL OBJECT

The materiality of my photographs as tangible three dimensional objects in combination with the two dimensionality of their pictorial surface allows them to take on the status of a *transitional object* for the spectator. This functions in a parallel psychoanalytic context to the transitional object as employed by the infant, for whom the object is a *possession* but neither an external object, nor an internal

one.³²⁵ Each of my abstract photographs functions as a transitional object for the viewer in a similar manner to the way in which my surrounding space played the role of a transitional object for me during the creative process. The surrounding space facilitated my journey towards adaptation in its external world through the utilization of the medium of photography as a means to play with the real.

With their status as transitional objects, therefore, my photographs become objects of contemplation in the context of the potential space of aesthetic experience that is situated in the intermediate area between two worlds of existence. These are the world of the abstract empty space of my photographs and the world of the spectators, who balance between their inner world of unconscious processes and their conscious reality of objective perception.

In this context my abstract images have a double function. They function both as part and whole objects depending on whose gaze they receive and under which conditions. As we can recall, Ehrenzweig's model of the three phases of creativity and the way in which they relate to the potential space helps us understand my role as a maker of the work and as an external viewer. The depressive position at the last phase of the potential space of making can be considered as the threshold between the creative process and the perception of the work as an external objectively accepted object. Arriving at and going through this transition, I am in between the part and the whole. My role as a spectator of my own images starts when I finally restore the work to its wholeness. According to Ehrenzweig, I am in a happier position than the spectators of my work since I can live the third part of the triple rhythm of projection, dedifferentiation and re-introjection that defines the creative process.³²⁶ Being a beholder of my own work I can relive its dreamy manic state of making and actually re-enter the potential space of it. I want to suggest here that the external spectators of my work are not necessarily in a less happy position when

³²⁵ D. W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, op. cit., p. 9. Winnicott here exactly writes: "The transitional object is not an internal object (which is a mental concept) – it is a possession. Yet it is not (for the infant) an external object either."

³²⁶ Anton Ehrenzweig, 'The Three Phases of Creativity', op. cit., p. 104.

experiencing the images both as forms and objects. They might not be able to re-introject and relive exactly the same process but they can experience an equally creative process of playing with reality and in a similar performative role.

Observations derived from external viewers of my work led me to suggest that the performative role of the spectators involves both their internal and external bodily motions in the attempt to engage with the abstract imagery in my photographs. My images presented in a gallery space stand both as objects, parts of that space, and transitional objects in the unconscious mind of the beholder. The spectators can then create their own play with the real within the spatial conditions of the gallery in which my images have the most dominant role. In this play, their understanding of the images is gradually achieved as they go through the transition from being in fusion with them (perceiving them internally as part objects) to realizing their integrity as external separate objects and finally grasping their concept.

The internal and external bodily motions performed by the spectators can be linked to the Deleuzian model and the space of abstraction it suggests as one full of potentialities. The mechanical relations³²⁷ at the level of intuition that are impressed and reflected on my abstract photographs cause mechanical bodily movements and internal bodily reactions to the beholders towards multiple directions. In this sense, the physical distance that separates my images from the beholder is also a psychological distance. It demonstrates that as the relationship between inner and outer reality can be performed in an empty space of tension between aspects of the photographic sign, in a similar manner the resolution of its tension can be performed by the spectator by means of his/her physical and psychological distance from the work.

The pure objecthood of the photographs is confined only in the pure physical actions of the beholder when trying to investigate the work in terms of its physical material presence. In this respect, the play I performed with the threads and wall lines opens up a new space of performance to the spectators. They respond to it by physically

³²⁷ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *op. cit.*, p. 498.

moving closer to the images to scrutinize their ambiguous character and engage with their materiality. But as it is evident, my photographs do not belong to the category of pure objecthood. They are not inexhaustible objects. My performative play invites the viewer to internally engage with them and suggest new possible directions that the lines can take. This allows the viewers to invest the images with new potentialities and open up the space of their abstractness to new directions of seeing and perceiving.. The psychologically invested space of my photographs scrutinized under a variety of beholders opens up its empty space of abstraction to accept a variety of different psychic layers with which the beholders invest this space in order for them to perceive it in its fullness. Their performance, both physical and psychical eventually leads to the unfolding of the abstract narrative of the space of emptiness, and therefore to the understanding of the paradox that the empty space of abstraction in photography presents.

The perception of my abstract photographs as transitional art objects can be applied to all kinds of photographs, as well as to any art object. The model developed here can explain psychoanalytically the aesthetic engagement with an artwork. Here, the potential space as an aesthetic model of abstraction helps in understanding the empty space of my abstract photographs in their wholeness, both as visual forms and material objects. The reception and perception of my photographs as transitional objects emphasizes the significance of the body as an idea that is evoked by my work and which has been discussed in relation to the concept of abstraction in the work of Eva Hesse and in Mark Rothko's paintings. It also plays an important role in the writings of Adrian Stokes for whom, as we can recall, it stands for the image of the human's existence. Stokes believes that the fear of annihilation finds reparation in its abstract expression in art whose "appeal of form is, in part, oral, encompassing, enveloping"³²⁸ and becomes more concrete than ever before. The oral appeal of the abstract form of my photographs when these are perceived as objects is associated with their status as transitional objects in the unconscious of the beholder during the viewing of the work. The photographic abstraction of the empty

³²⁸ See footnote 147..

forms through the act of aesthetic viewing functions as food for the spectator's internal desires, which are contained in and manifested in the external world through his/her bodily expressions. Going through the potential space of aesthetic experience, the beholder of my work is working through his/her own carving and modelling positions, which according to Stokes contribute, as already discussed, to the aesthetic appreciation of art. My photographs' oral enveloping of the beholder can also be associated with Kuspit's ideas around the function of abstract art as a shield against modern world's fear of annihilation. The emptiness of my abstract photographic forms, finally reaches a point that can be perceived as fullness. In doing so they provide the spectator with a relief from the stressful world by making him/her aware of the reality of that world through the new reality vision that the photographs create and which is the reality of themselves as new autonomous, actual objects. This is how my photographs as transitional objects facilitate the viewer to reach acceptance of reality.

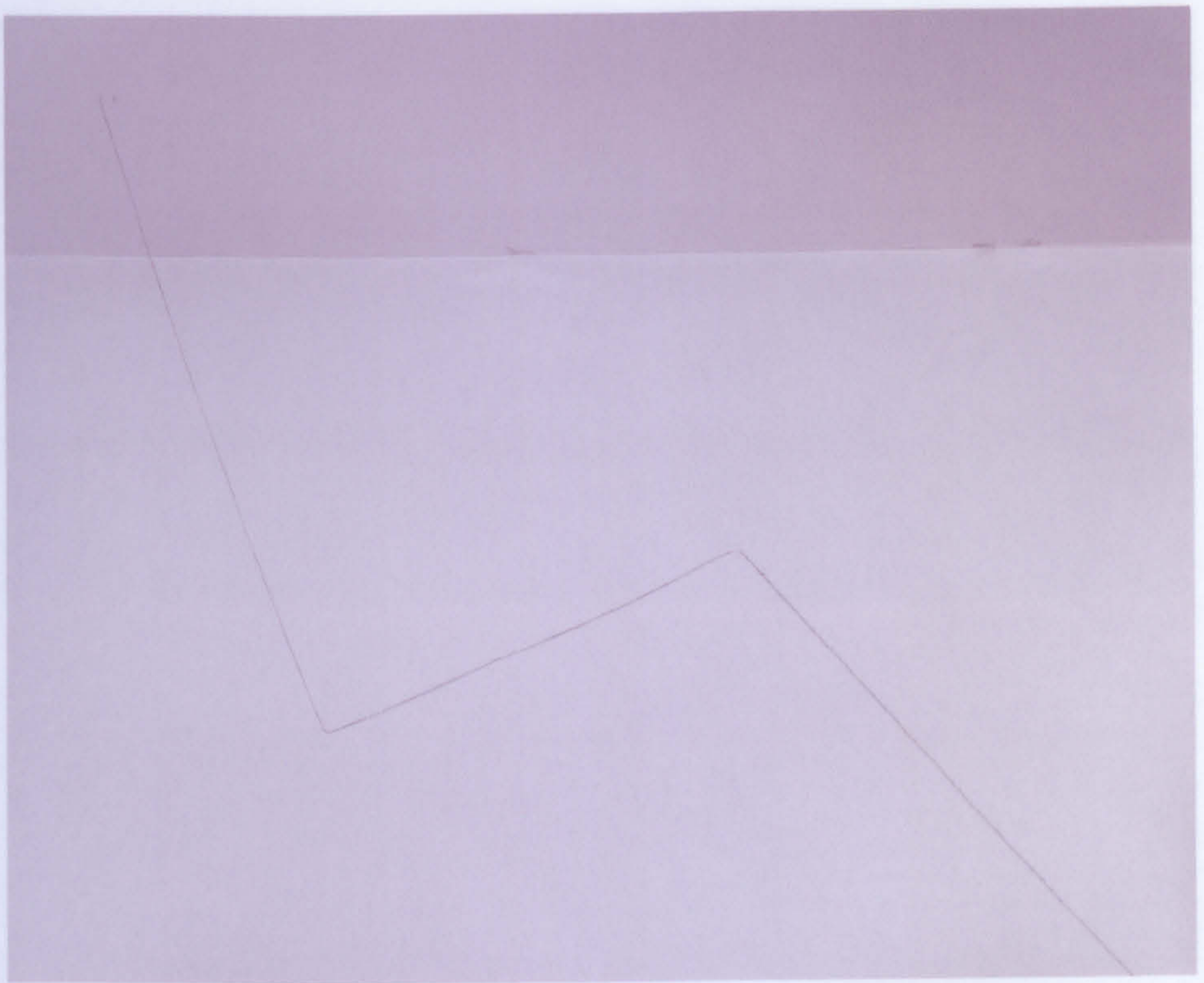
A conclusion about the empty abstract photographic field of my practice should probably include a resolution regarding the paradox of photographic abstraction. The ambiguity between the indexical status of the photographic sign and its status as an abstract form creates a tension in the function of abstraction in my images. This ambiguity, as the formal outcome of the mechanism of the potential space as an aesthetic model of abstraction, raises more questions than answers. The theoretical and practical issues that emerged from my practice offer new possibilities around the understanding of photographic abstraction and open up a discursive space around this problem to enable further investigation and exploration both in theory and practice.

The unpredictable and multidirectional potentialities that the potential space of abstraction offers do not provide an absolute resolution to the problem of abstraction in photography. They do not define the empty abstract space of my images as a specific type of abstraction that can be categorised in any of the typologies already discussed. Considering that photography historically proved to be a medium that

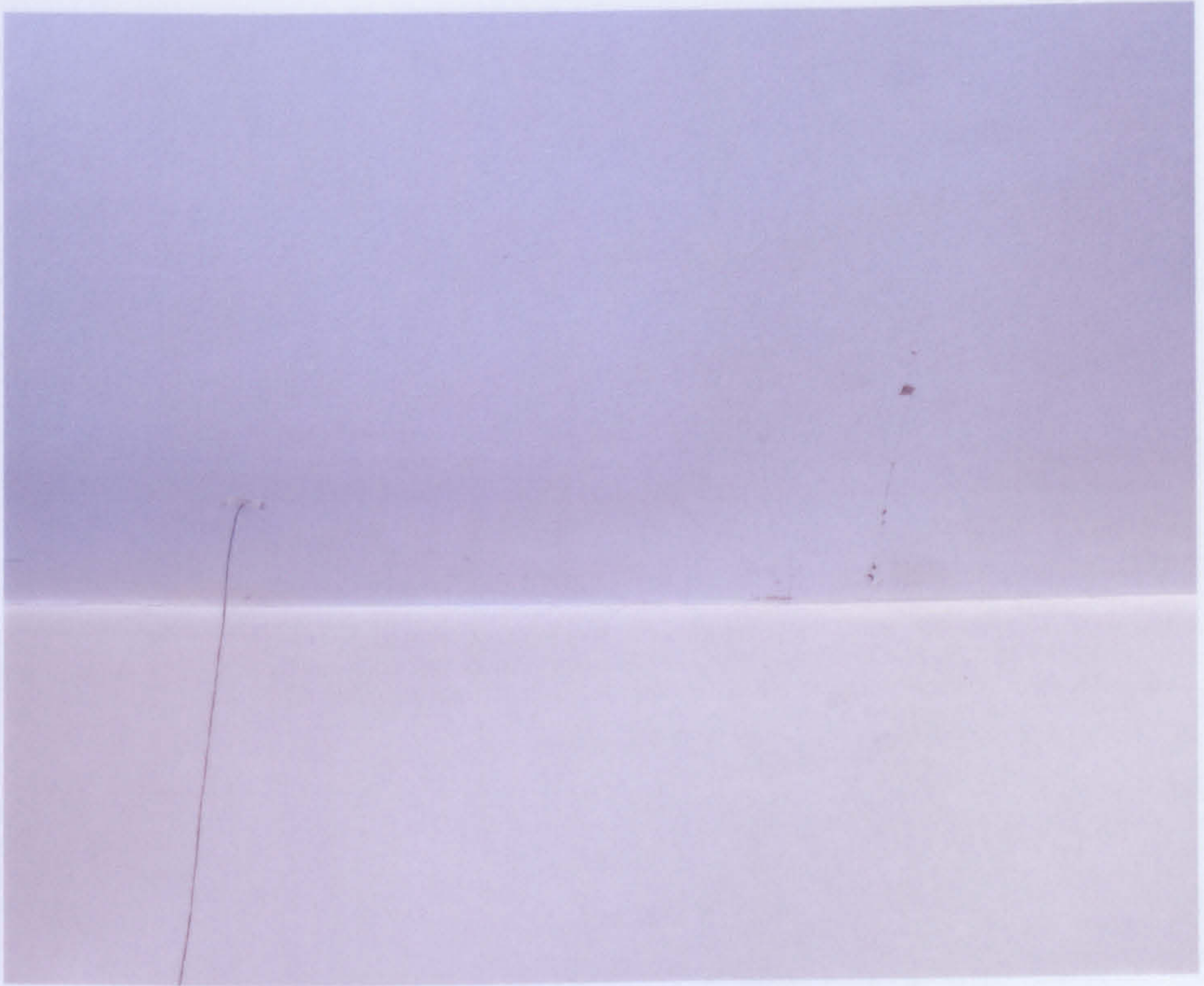
continuously changes towards many promising directions (as we saw in the particular category of the historical development of photographic abstraction), the ambiguity in my images constitutes a partial resolution of that problem. It provides a redefinition of the problem seen from the psychoanalytical perspective within the context of the creation of the abstract photographs.

Abstraction, as it emerges from my photographic practice, can be seen as another view of the objective real world. It suggests a new framework of concepts and ideas through which to view the referent of photography in its abstract form, without reducing its abstraction to a withdrawn level of pure form that does not exhibit any association with the real. The emptiness of the optical field of my images redefines photographic abstraction as a space of tension between aspects of the sign. It opens up that space as one in which the relationship between inner and outer reality can be performed and can become a space of action and intervention.

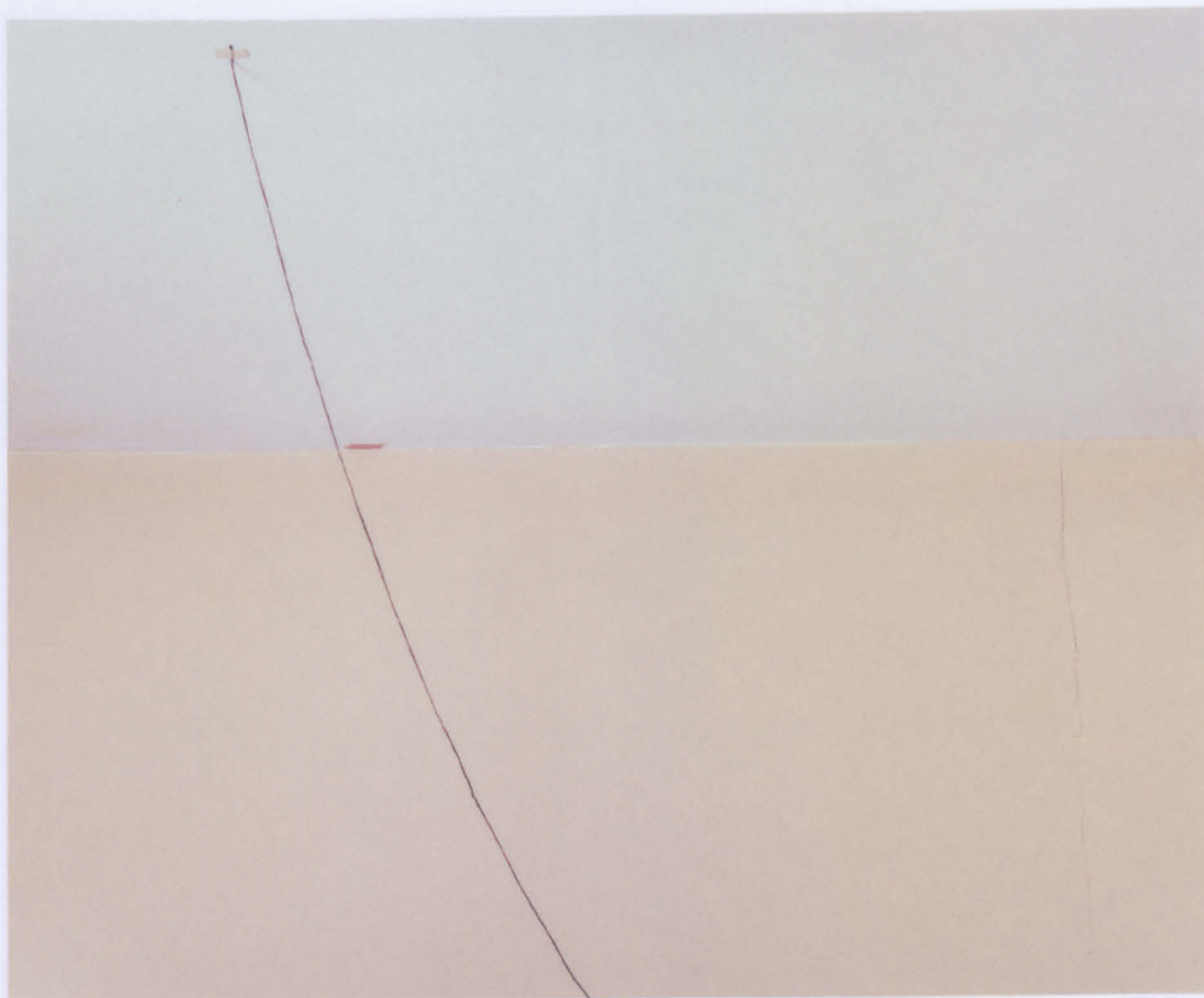
PORTFOLIO – MY WORK



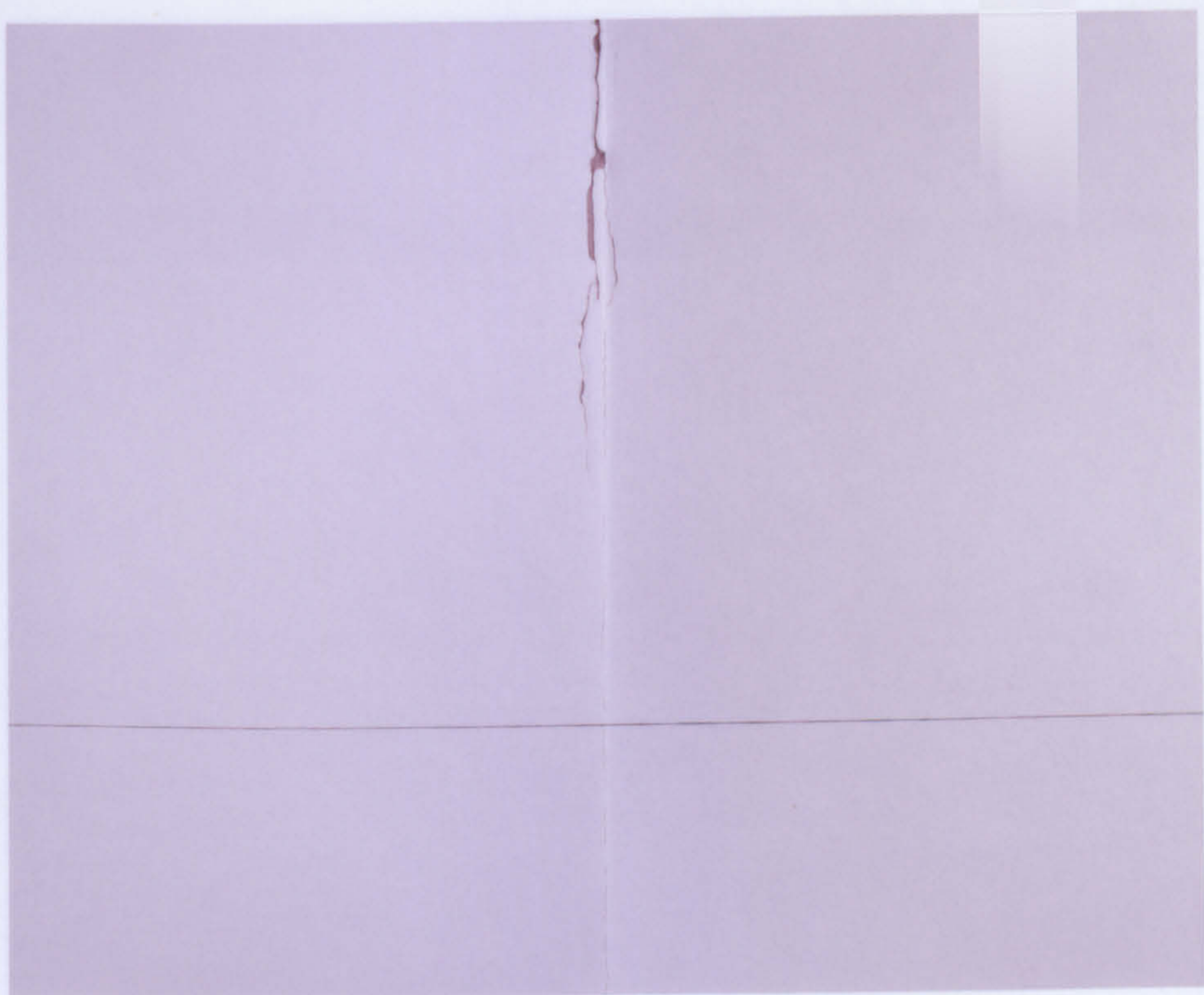
Untitled 2, Giclée print, 80x100 cm



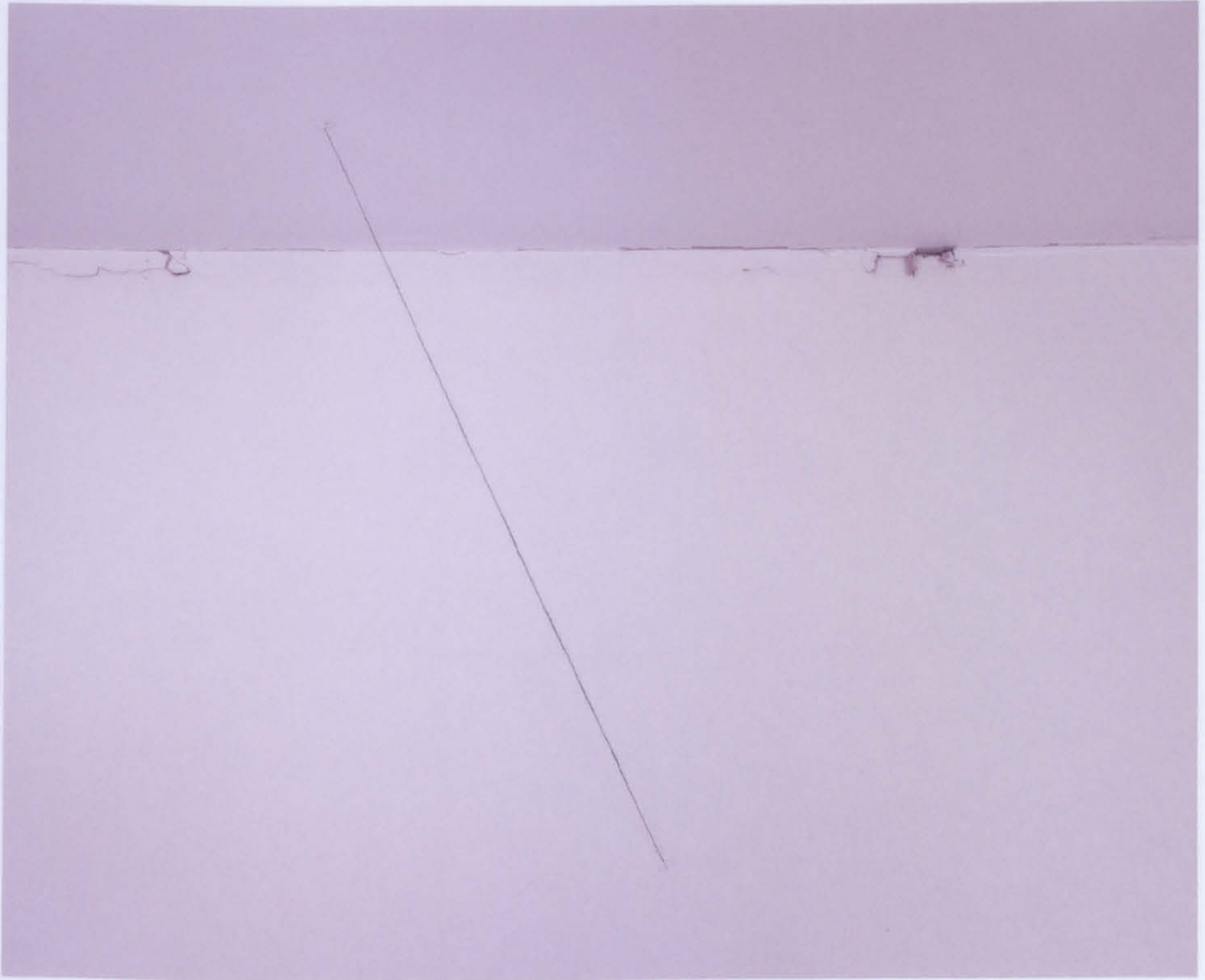
Untitled 3, Giclée print, 80x100 cm



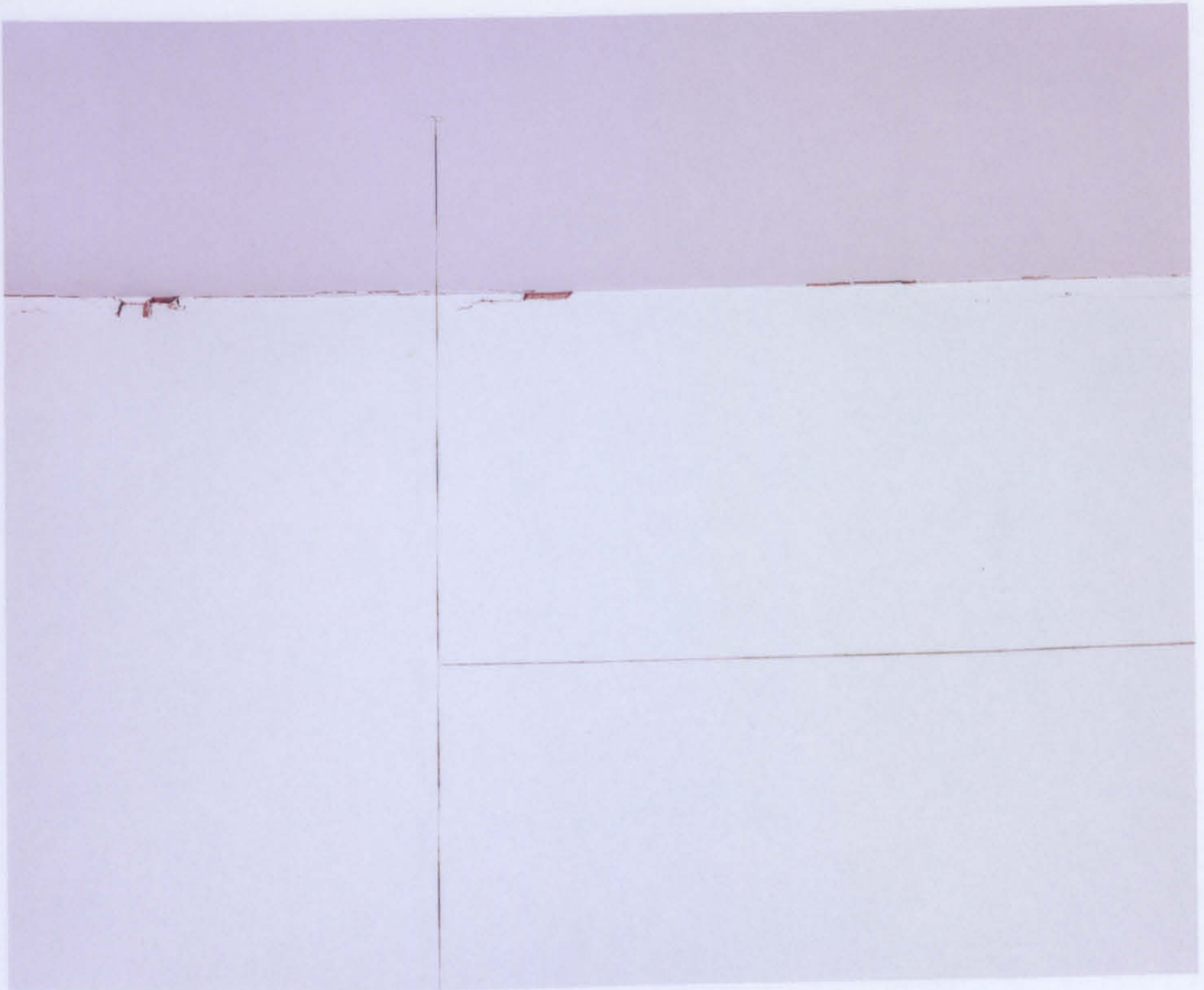
Untitled 4, Giclée print, 80x100 cm



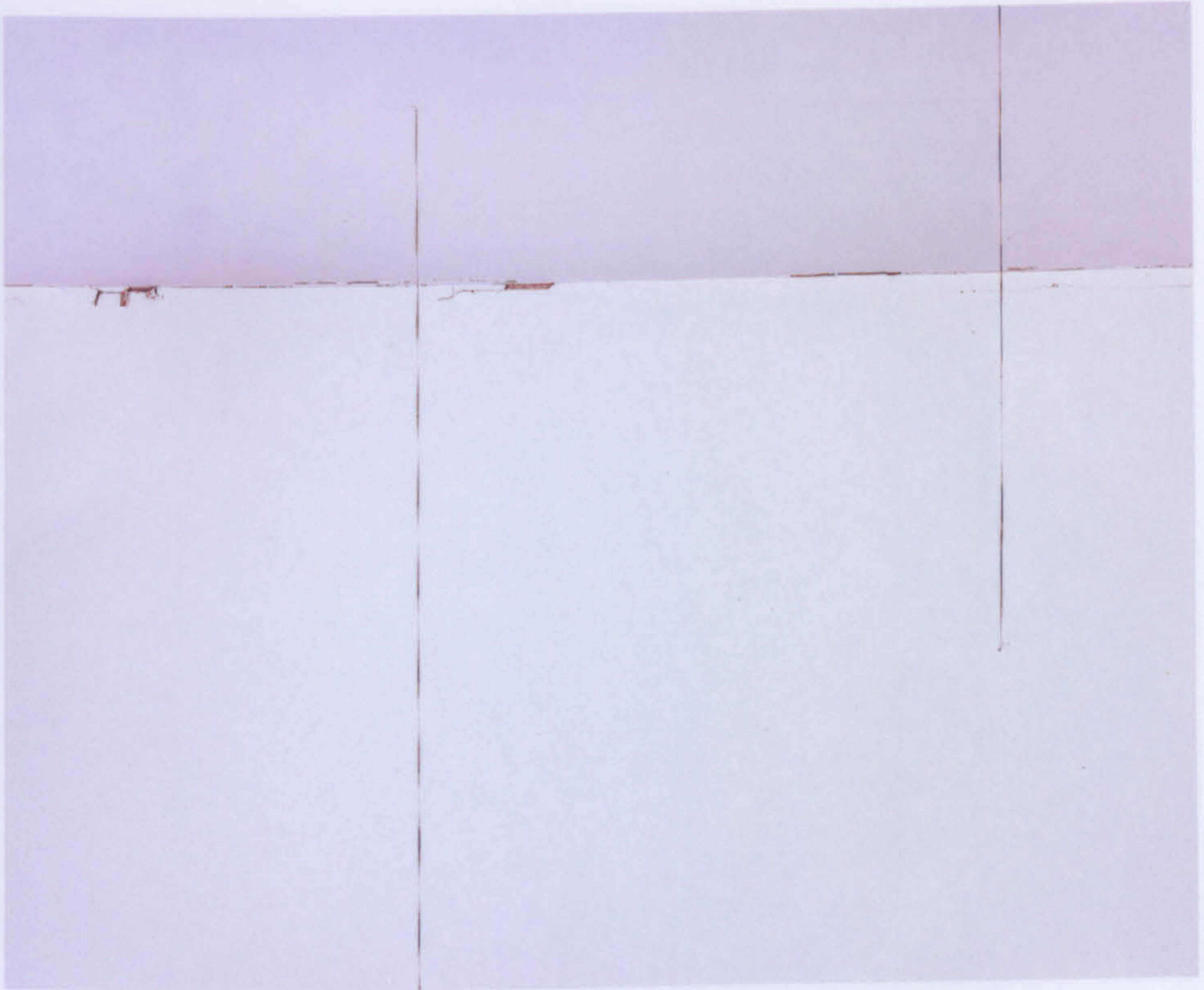
Untitled 5, Giclée print, 80x100 cm



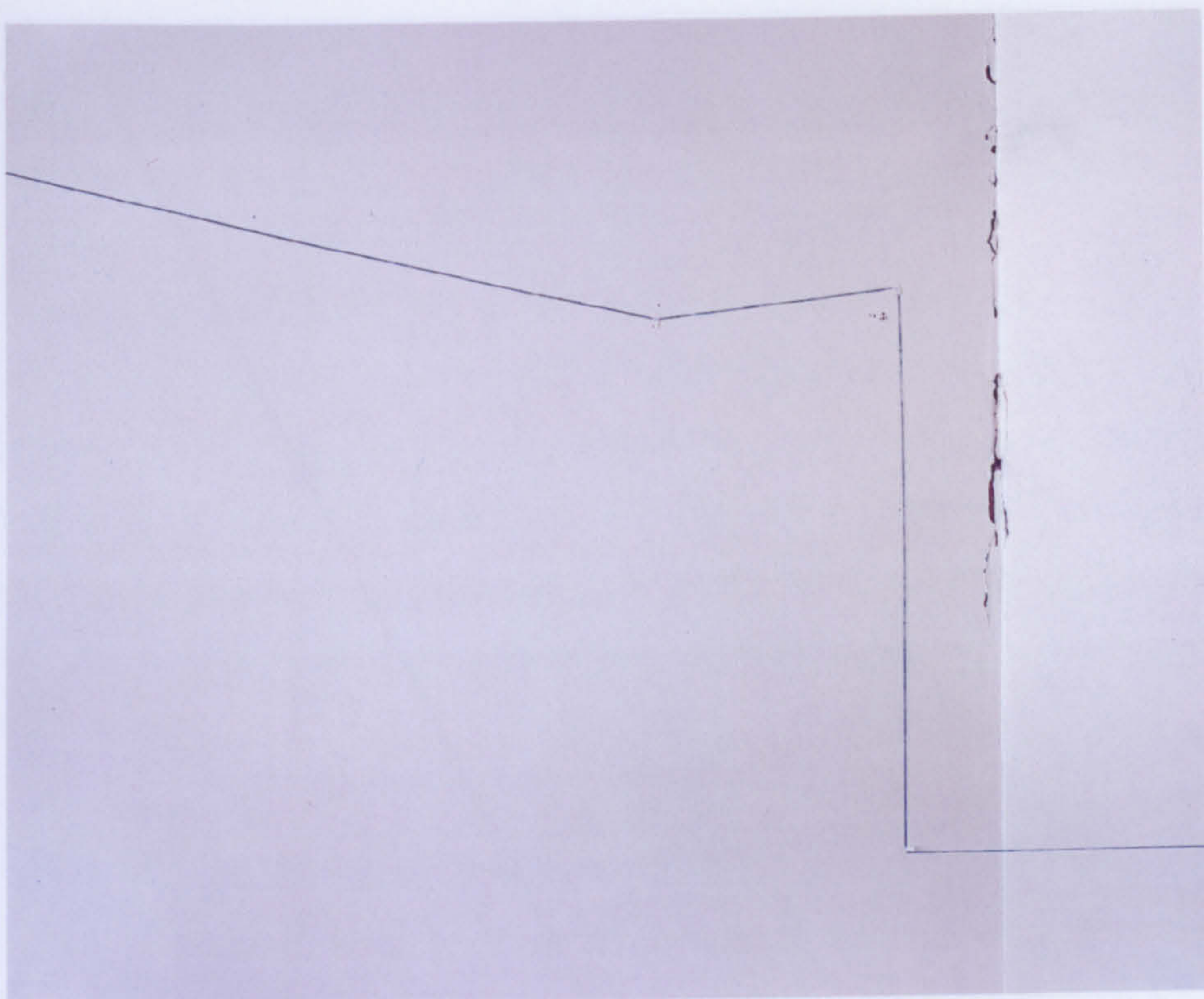
Untitled 6, Giclée print, 80x100 cm



Untitled 7, Giclée print, 80x100 cm



Untitled 8, Giclée print, 80x100 cm



Untitled 9, Giclée print, 80x100 cm

CONCLUSION

To draw a conclusion on the problems raised and analyzed in my thesis I want to say

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Untitled 10, Giclée print, 80x100 cm

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CONCLUSION

To draw a conclusion to the problems raised and analysed in my thesis I want to lay emphasis on the outcome of the research and stress the way in which it enriches our knowledge about the medium of photography and specifically about abstraction in photography.

The research question I initially posed revolved around the referentiality of the photograph and how this changes when its object of referent shifts its meaning to become an abstract form. I particularly explored this in the visual formal problem of the optical, empty space of abstraction that emerged from my own photographic practice and in the context of psychoanalytic ideas of interiority and exteriority that provide a theoretical ground for understanding the relationship of the abstract image to the inner world.

I described how the concept of abstraction in art is viewed in the context of three different models – abstraction as withdrawal, the modernist model and the Deleuzian model – and how the theory of abstraction is related to a theory of the “subject” regarding its psychic structures. I then argued that an aesthetic model of abstraction formulated around the concept of *potential space* provides me with the theoretical material to analyse the empty abstract space in my work, as well as in works of other contemporary photographers, and to draw an understanding about the general problem of abstraction in photography.

The effect of ambiguity between the transparency and reduction of the photographic sign is presented as the dominant issue in reading the emptiness of the abstract photographic space. The partially resolved problem of abstraction in this thesis offers a redefinition of abstraction in photography rather than a final resolution to the issues that emerge out of it. In this respect, the outcome of my research contributes to the redefinition of the medium of photography by demonstrating how

contemporary practitioners including myself deploy new strategies of engagement with abstract imagery.

The employment of the concept of *potential space* as an aesthetic model for understanding the ambiguous tension of the empty pictorial space of abstraction in my work constitutes an original contribution to discussions around abstraction in photography. This understanding of the potential space provide us with a new theoretical platform of concepts that contribute to an understanding of the relationship of the abstract image to the inner world. More specifically, the usefulness of such a framework of concepts consists in redefining the space of photographic abstraction as an empty space of tension between aspects of the sign, in which the relationship between inner and outer reality can be performed and can become a space of action and intervention.

Furthermore, the employment of Winnicottian and Kleinian psychoanalytic concepts from the British School of Psychoanalysis as opposed to the dominant Freudian and Lacanian ones demonstrates an opening up of the space around photographic theories to engage with concepts that have not been used in this context before. By enriching the discourse of photographic abstraction with such a new framework of ideas, my research contributes to a fuller understanding of the medium.

This is what underpins the beauty of such a peculiar and multifaceted medium as photography. It is full of hidden potentialities which are waiting to be realized through the employment of the appropriate theoretical and practical tools. The use of the specific psychoanalytic theory of transitional phenomena in my research aims to develop the aesthetics of the medium and an understanding of its internal mechanisms. It is not utilized as a therapeutic method through which to use photographic abstraction to treat any specific trauma of my personal life. Neither is it used to symbolically interpret the specific forms in the abstract images. On the contrary, by playing creatively with psychoanalytical notions from Winnicottian and Kleinian models, I project these into the space of photography as a means to produce

a new photographic reality invested with a psychic dimension that contributes to the comprehension of abstraction from another perspective. Moreover, by offering a new set of concepts with which to look at photographic abstraction, I open the space of practice up to further exploration.

APPENDIX

METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH PROCESS

My practice was developed during three different stages of photographic exploration. The creative process of making the work took place on the grounds of establishing the abstract space of the photograph as a space having a psychic dimension, which is better understood through Winnicott's psychoanalytic theory of *Transitional Phenomena*¹, based on the theory of *Object Relations*² as proposed by Melanie Klein. Winnicott positions the *transitional phenomena* in an intermediate area of experience between the internal and external reality. Within this area, *the potential space*, creativity originates as a zone of fictive play and free mentation that facilitates the subject's journey from "what is subjectively conceived of" to "what is objectively perceived" throughout his/her development towards adaptation in the real world. Drawing upon these theories suggests the use of specific concepts and terms to comprehend the abstract space of my practice throughout all the stages of my photographic exploration. Notions such as object-relating, playing with the real, good/bad object, part/whole object, internal/external object, unconscious phantasies, projection/introjection mechanisms, empty space, potential space, intermediate area of experience, integration, adaptation, restoration and transitional object constitute the vocabulary that structures my creative process.

The development of my research project was based on an exploratory method³ of a creative journey of playing with the real, making sense and making meaning and aiming

¹ D. W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, London: Tavistock Publications, 1971.

² Melanie Klein, *Contributions to Psycho-Analysis 1921-1945*, The International Psycho-Analytical Library, No. 34, London: The Hogarth Press and The Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1973.

³ For theoretical support in how to do research, information on methodology issues as well as on the relationship of Practice to Theory see:

Fiona Candlin, 'A proper anxiety? Practice-based PhDs and academic unease' *Working Papers in Art and Design 1* [online], 2000, [Accessed: 14 November 2003], Available at:
<http://www.herts.ac.uk/artdes1/research/papers/wpades/vol1/candlin2full.html>

Stephen Scrivener, 'The art object does not embody a form of knowledge', *Working Papers in Art and Design 2* [online], 2002, [Accessed: 11 January 2004], Available at:
<http://www.herts.ac.uk/artdes1/research/papers/wpades/vol2/scrivenerfull.html>

Katie MacLeod, 'The functions of the written text in practice-based PhD submissions', *Working Papers in Art and Design 1* [online], 2000, [Accessed: 18 January 2004], Available at:
<http://www.herts.ac.uk/artdes1/research/papers/wpades/vol1/macleod2.html>

to develop a deep understanding of the issues raised from the practice itself to push my argument further. In this respect, my research followed parallel pathways both in theory and practice with one informing the other in the process of exploring and investigating the problem.

Jane Webb, 'Research in perspective: the practice of theory', *Working Papers in Art and Design* 1 [online], 2000, [Accessed: 25 January 2004], Available at:
<http://www.herts.ac.uk/artdes1/research/papers/wpades/vol1/webb1.html>

Kristina Niedderer, et al., 'Why is there the need for explanation? – objects and their realities', *Working Papers in Art and Design* 3 [online], 2004, [Accessed: 25 January 2004], Available at:
<http://www.herts.ac.uk/artdes1/research/papers/wpades/vol3/knabs.html>

Linden Reilly, 'An alternative model of 'knowledge' for the arts', *Working Papers in Art and Design* 2 [online], 2002, [Accessed: 12 June 2006], Available at:
<http://www.herts.ac.uk/artdes1/research/papers/wpades/vol2/reilly.html>

Lorraine Blaxter, et al., *How to research*, Buckingham: Open University Press, 2001.

Elizabeth Orna and Graham Stevens, *Managing information for research*, Buckingham: Open University Press, 1995.

Rowena Murray, *How to write a thesis*, Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2002.

Carole Gray and Julian Malins, *Visualizing research: a guide to the research process in art and design*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004.

Richard Pears and Graham Shields, *Cite them right: referencing made easy*, Newcastle Upon Tyne: Northumbria University Press, 2004.

Numeric Style Bibliographies and Referencies [online], 2007, [Accessed: 12 September 2007], Available at: <http://www.leeds.ac.uk/library/training/referencing/numeric.htm>

John Z. Langrish, 'Not all games have a ball', *Gray's School of Art Research Student Summer School 2005*, The Robert Gordon University, Aberdeen, 15-19 August 2005.

The notion of *space*⁴ has a central role in my practice as it constitutes the reality world of objects and it is dealt with as an external whole object in a broader sense throughout my engagement with it. My creative process is about a journey of seeking for a fusion of *spacescapes* with *mindscapes*, during which the mode of encounter and interaction with my surrounding space is based on my perception of it as a place of exploration, adjustment and development of the subject and a place of creativity where the produced artworks, (the photographs in this case), are products of projections and introjections of parts of the self. By the term *spacescapes* I mean the urbanscapes and landscapes as well as the interior domestic spaces I encountered with my lens throughout my practice. I dealt with those spacescapes as spaces having a psychological impact upon me, into which I projected my *phantasies* and unconscious desires and which I fused with by internalizing them in the form of introjected part objects and attempting to reach a state of oneness with them.

⁴ This context in which I situate the notion of space is implied by the Kleinian theory of Object-Relations and all related vocabulary that accompanies it, such as the concept of introjection/projection, internal/external part objects, whole objects, etc.

The following quotations come from Paula Heimann in:

Paula Heimann, 'Certain Functions Of Introjection And Projection In Early Infancy', op. cit.

The concept of "introjection" was first introduced by Ferenczi who "was concerned with showing that introjection is the means by which the widening of the child's interests proceeds. In his view all mental progress is effected by the child's introjecting more and more from his surroundings." (p. 131)

Also Paula Heimann writes:

Perception and its component operations (attention, taking notice of, storing in memory, judging, etc.) are bound up with introjection and projection ... perception cannot be divorced from object-relation. (p. 126)

The capacity for object-relation too is subject to the process of development ...It takes the whole long course of emotional and mental progression for a person to arrive at mature object-relations, in which the object is acknowledged as an individual in its own right ... (p. 141) This is the stage of the "whole object" relationship to which this progress leads.

Therefore, I would say that the development of the subject is achieved by living in a world of objects (objects in the surrounding space) and interacting with them through the basic function of perception which, as understood by the object-relations theory, operates under the mechanisms of introjection and projection that are responsible for making sense of the external environment in the different developmental stages.

Also see: Gaston Bachelard, *The poetics of space: the classic look at how we experience intimate places*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1994.

Also, regarding how perceive space see:

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The visible and the invisible*, Northwestern University Press, 1968.

Within this context of my particular encounter with the reality world, I ascribe the notion of space with the meaning of a *transitional object* because it facilitates my adaptation within it. It functions in a parallel psychoanalytic context with the transitional object as employed by the infant, for whom the transitional object is a *possession* without being either an internal object, or an external one. It embodies the idea of *transition* as a psychoanalytic phenomenon that facilitates the process towards integration from the inner world to the external world of objective perception. An important role in this journey of creative adaptation in the space is played by the moment of the *event* that functioned as a catalyst for the development of my practice. The term *event*, as I specifically define it in the context of my thesis, refers to any kind of inner or/and external stimulation that made me *see* and *identify* in front of my eyes that what I was confronting with my camera lens was adequate to the ideas I had in my mind. The moment of the *event*⁵ can be described as a fusion of the mind with the space. It is in that moment that the act of taking a photograph makes sense of the world. The act of *playing* with the *reality* seems to make sense in the realisation that mind and space are aligned in the creative act of taking a photo, which can be considered as a an act that takes place in the potential intermediate space of experience functioning as a link between the internal and external reality. Out of this context my photographs emerge as the result of a creative play with the external world, a play that has a silent, unconsciously secret performative dimension, since the photographic space I create is a subjective interpretation of my objective reality. It is not a documentation of it.

In the paragraphs describing the different stages of my practice, I will suggest how the use of those specific Winnicottian psychoanalytic concepts provided me with a methodological framework within which I developed my research project and reached an

⁵ For issues related to the notion of “sublime” that initially were brought up in the context of my *events* see:

Renée van de Vall, ‘Silent Visions: Lyotard on the sublime’, *Art and design*, Vol. 10, January/February 1995, pp. 69-75.

Barnett Newman, ‘The Sublime Is Now, 1948’, in Herschel B. Chip, ed., *Theories of Modern Art: a source book by artists and critics*, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1968, pp. 552-553.

understanding of its emerging theoretical and practical issues (See the images of the different stages in the section (D) of the appendix).

A. FIRST STAGE OF THE CREATIVE PROCESS – 35mm format photography (digital and film)

My research started on the basis of a strong preoccupation of mine with abstract photography and more specifically of ideas that derived from a critique of a previous body of work - *Not Allowed Series* - that I had started just before commencing my PhD. That work is about selecting specific parts of the everyday reality of the urban city space and stepping on them in such a manner that seems to ask for permission whether to do so or not. Those parts of space shout *not allowed* and they bring their visitors into a confrontation with the dilemma of how their own personal restrictions can affect their decisions regarding their relationship to their space. The ideas elicited from that work revolve around the question of how the representation of space can be achieved by means of abstract photographs under the umbrella of the psychoanalytic perspective of the notions of the *boundary, obstacle, threshold, edge, barrier and border*.⁶ In other words, I

⁶ Adam Philips, a contemporary psychoanalyst who was influenced by Winnicott's theory on object-relations wrote:

Consciousness is of obstacles. Wherever you look, as the Chinese proverb says, there's something in the way. ... we are also composed of two worlds: a world without the usual obstacles – the unconscious that Freud called 'the other place' – and a world that is an obstacle-course, a world presided over by the ego in its desperate search for obstacles. ... And without obstacles the notion of development, at least in its progressivist sense, is inconceivable. There would be nothing to master.

This quote is from:

Adam Philips, 'Looking at Obstacles', *On Kissing, Tickling and Being Bored: Psychoanalytic Essays on the Unexamined Life*, Boston and London: Faber and Faber, 1994, pp. 97-98.

Also see: Ernest Hartmann, M.D., *Boundaries in the mind: a new psychology of personality*, New York: Basic Books, 1991.

For a diversity of approaches regarding the notion of the "boundary" see:

Christopher Crickmay, *Boundary Shifting*, A second level interdisciplinary Course, Art and Environment Unit 13, Great Britain: The Open University Press, 1976.

Achille Varzi, 'Boundary', *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* [online], February 9, 2004, [Accessed: 28 March 2004], Available at:
<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/boundary/>

was prompted to explore the relationship of the abstract photographic image to the inner world.

A.1 Urbanscape - 35mm digital images

The employment of those notions led me to seek boundaries and thresholds within the urbanscapes of my town using a digital camera as a quick and quantitative method of taking photographs in the attempt to produce a photographic sketching as a map of the terrain around those concepts. From my experiments in playfully interacting with and responding to the demands of the urban architecture I have selected a small group of images. These constitute manifestations of how the urbanscape can be rendered in abstract photographs that suggest a relationship to the internal world of the unconscious rather than documentary comments on the sociopolitical, ethnographical or other conditions implied by the structure of that space.

The compositional strategy I apply in these images reveals a systematic abstraction of the urban space in a rigorous formal manner that preserves the degree of its recognizability. The unsaturated colour palette and the effect of flatness as result of the almost ground plan angle of view and the diffusive lighting conditions enhance the materiality of the photographs while they weaken the importance of the materiality of the objects recorded on them. Their abstraction emerges out of the context of object-relating with the urbanscape, as a space full of objects that psychoanalytically operate as obstacles and boundaries in the photographic task of navigating through that spatial field and seeking for pathways of freedom as thresholds in the intermediate area between the objects. This area emerges not only as the actual intermediate space between the objects but also as the semiotic space that negotiates the distance between their status as indexical signs and as abstract forms.

Consequently, the urbanscape images of this first stage of my practice suggest the construction of a new abstract urban optical field invested with a psychic dimension as

For exploration of these notions in painting see:
Marion Milner, *On not being able to paint*, London: Heinemann, 1984.

the result of an architectural structure of the mind. They emerge as a space that reflects the introjected stimuli of that urban field projected into its pictorial photographic surface.

A.2 Seascapes - 35mm digital and film images

My spatial exploration then moved to the seascapes of seashore towns. My task now, aiming at the representation of the new spatial arrangements in response to my search for boundaries and thresholds in a new environment, took place in a mode of more systematic abstraction of space based on and improving the previously utilized compositional techniques. Although the group of photographs I have selected from this set of investigations demonstrates a strong identification with landscape images, their specific abstract manipulation and rendering of the seascape into a two dimensional pictorial space reveals how the emphasis is given to the formal elements and their internal relationships, rather than to any documentary narrative that might accompany those landscapes.

The frontal angle of view is the main trait that distinguishes this group of images from the previous one. The employment of this specific vantage point ascribes them the effect of flatness on a pictorial surface where the seascape elements are involved in an interesting spatial formal play that seems to cause the collapse of the three dimensionality of the landscape of reference. In this collapsed flat space the colour forms are invested with my psychic projections into their optical status as obstacles and boundaries that prevent, limit or free the gaze towards the direction of an empty space of freedom.

The arrangement of the forms was based on my perception of them as good or bad part objects depending on my responses to them when creatively scanning the spacescape of the beach with my gaze in order to render its objects in the two-dimensional space of the photographs. My unconscious responses to their in-between space were projected as a space of fusion of my mind with the seascape into the space of the photograph. The compositional strategy of all the formal elements shows an attempt of balancing the tension caused both by their investment as obstacle objects and as objects that can facilitate the journey of navigation and orientation in the landscape.

It is evident that the urbanscape images as well as the seascape ones project a pictorial space where the objects as obstacles oscillate between their presence in the real world and their absence as abstract forms on the pictoriality of the photographs. Their psychological investment as unconscious boundaries in the mind is projected as the struggle to narrow the distance between their representation as landscape objects and their abstraction as formal colour volumes that carry the psychological projections of the subject. The translation of the subject's unconscious phantasy desires into material terms is reflected through his/her bodily performance during interaction with the surrounding space. The question I posed myself was how short that gap between representation and abstraction needs to become in order for integration with space as a whole object is achieved. How might photographic abstraction make sense despite the preservation of the indexical status of the photographic sign?

A.3 Pebble Field - 35mm digital images

The continuation of my experiments towards the creation of a pebble field of vision as an attempt to narrow that aforementioned distance resulted in the production of two different sets of images. Partially, this took place on the grounds of having previsualized the desired picture frame of the photographs so that the spatial arrangements would be rendered into a more abstract flat field of representation. Artists such as Vija Celmins⁷ have explored this relationship between the picture frame and an alloverness of the formal content enclosed in it. Influenced by the qualities of such a modernist space I projected my desires into the pebble ground of the seascape that I kept drawing on as my creative playground. The introjected part pebble objects were processed in such a manner that a more abstract field of vision was produced by my photographic act, which more successfully erases the narrative of the landscape document than the previous groups of photographs.

These images, constructed through a more minimal compositional approach, are strongly suggestive of a deeper association with an internal state of existence, not only as regards the relationship of the subject to the space but also the internal conditions among the

⁷ James Lingwood, ed., *Vija Celmins: Works 1964-96*, London: Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1996.

formal elements that bring them together to denote relations invested with a psychic dimension embodied in their construction. The photographic abstraction in this case is positioned at the threshold between the previous abstract degree of representation, with its documentary associations, and possibility of becoming less attached to the real field of reference, with the potential to become even more abstract.

My experiments at this first stage of my practice opened up the space of exploration in an attempt to achieve a shorter distance between the transparency and abstraction of the photograph. They led me to make an unpredictable shift in the development of my practice that marked the transition from the exterior to the interior space as a new arena for a different type of object-relation.

This shift also marked the emergence of the *potential space* as the most useful concept around which I developed the next stages of my practice. Moving the playground of my exploration to the interiorscape of a room might initially be seen as a symptom of withdrawal in the course of my project's development. But as my practice's progress showed, this withdrawal can only be seen as serving the opposite purpose, as in the view of Arnheim's⁸ and all the previously aforementioned theorists', who see abstraction as referring to reality rather than just a turn to a regressive target or an absolute form that transcends reality.

Turning my explorative play to an object relationship within the space of a room can be seen as a positive shift that aimed at the engagement with the real from another perspective. This new view of reality was constructed within the conditions of the potential space of experience that marks the transition from the inner to the external world. Within the interiorscape, in which my investigation continued, abstraction in my photographs was developed as a more playful engagement with the real and set the ground for a more creative potential regarding the rendering of the spatial relations in the pictorial photographic space. The shift of my practice from the external space to an interior one negotiated a more profound transition between the inner and the outside

⁸ See footnote 140 in Chapter 1: Section 1.3.1.2

world, which within the context of the underpinning concept of the potential space negotiated the indexical and iconic status of the photographic sign as a transition between representation and abstraction. I must emphasize here again, based on the explanation I proposed earlier in this thesis, that this should not lead to the confusion that representation is equated with the indexical and abstraction with the iconic.

B. SECOND STAGE OF THE CREATIVE PROCESS – medium format photography

The interior domestic space of my room constituted the new basis for my explorations at this stage. For the purposes of my experiments I utilized a medium format camera in order to achieve a better printing quality as well as to enter into a different relationship with the room as a potential space by having to work in a slower production rhythm and act more systematically so as to reach the desired control of the space under the advanced requirements of the camera.

The images produced depict corners and edges of the walls in different variations and arranged in an abstract composition so as to generate various geometrical shapes interrelated to one another. Their colour quality approximates to the status of the monochrome as one colour dominates the picture frame depending on the type of illumination – daylight or artificial – that is reflected from the wall surfaces. They principally depict an empty wall surface perceived from an unusual vantage point, which is disrupted by the peeled pieces of paint along the edges of the room as marks that remind us of the referentiality of the photographs.

The play with reality, suggested by the concept of the *potential space*, starts to emerge more clearly in this set of images. This play refers mostly to my creative responses to the sense that the peeled pieces of paint directed a gaze of surveillance at me as a resident in that interior. By taking photographs of them I returned the gaze of surveillance and related to them in a form of a creative play. The new architectural spatial relations

derived from this play form a flat abstract pictorial space in which those pieces of paint are invested with the psychoanalytic notion of the objects as obstacles to my way of feeling a sense of comfort in the room. The photographic representation of the interiorscape relations in a new pictorial optical field projects a space of vision that suggests a transitional function. It functions as a threshold, as both a separation and a link between my sense of serenity as regards my presence in that interior space and the external world where I felt distracted in my confrontation with those pieces of paint hanging from the ceiling.

These images comprised the basis for the construction of a three-dimensional model of a room that constituted the next stage of my practice.

B.1 The Model Room

The *model room* was based on the idea of creating a three-dimensional space of immersive experience that would function as an installation piece. This room would represent a gallery space where the already discussed photographs would play a double role. They would cover the actual walls of the gallery and at the same time they would act as the visual photographic works hanging from its walls. In this respect, the viewers would be able to experience the sensation of being inside and outside simultaneously.

This abstract room would be constructed by *folding* photographic parts of real space to form its structure. It would thus function as an actual three-dimensional potential space where its abstraction would negotiate the space between the photographs as a representation of/substitution for the external reality and external surroundings of the viewer, and their status as abstract pictorial forms that suggest the internal conditions of the medium.

B.2 The Unfolded Room

Critical reflection on this idea led me to experiment further with the reverse action of *unfolding* the model room on the plane and creating a flat abstract version of its three-

dimensional status of the model room. This implies the creation of an imaginary flat space constructed by photographic parts of the real world. Its flatness suggests the projection of parts of a real room into the formation of an imaginary one on the plane.

The gesture of *folding* and *unfolding* the room points to a way of handling space as object in the context of a post photographic play with the real. The empty space contained in the interior of the imaginary unfolded room implies then its function as a potential space that offers new potentials for creativity. The transition from the external world of objects to the internal space of a photograph composed of other photographs offers new possibilities of playing with the real and the representation of the real, thus opening the space to unobstructed navigation in it by facilitating the ongoing task of the subject that aims at his integration and adaptation in the world. The numbers added externally and the drawing of an imaginary door, as a point of exit or a threshold, indicate exactly those attempts of mapping the empty space in the journey of orientation in within it, by defining a territory and becoming familiar with its parts.

C. THIRD STAGE OF THE CREATIVE PROCESS – large format photography (5x4' colour slides)

The stage of the unfolded room opened up the possibilities for further investigation around the problem of abstract representation of space when this is confronted, either as the objective world of objects or as an object itself that is liable to the introjections and projections of the artist-subject. The distance that defines the pictorial space of the photograph between indexicality and iconicity (as formal representation of the reality) is becoming shorter and shorter. Is there a point where the gap between the two will be eliminated or even if this gap is still there, how small can it become to be able to create a smooth transition from the external referential world to the internal formal relations of the photographic pictorial space?

These questions are explored in this third stage of my practice where the use of a large format camera⁹ and 4x5' colour transparencies as the photosensitive carrier of the images introduced an additional degree of difficulty regarding the controls needed for handling space with my equipment. My experiments continued to take place in the interiorscape of my room, which constituted the playground of my photographic creativity until the end of the project. Due to the emptiness of the wall surfaces, focusing the camera lens proved to be a difficult task, which made it necessary to use masking tape drawn with red marker scribbles so as to be placed on the wall as a visible enough target for easy focus. These marks then represented a meeting point between the technical demands of the photographic apparatus, the index of a personal intervention or *play* within the space, and an idea of *mapping* as a way of tracing the limits of the space..

C.1 The Part Objects

A selection of images representative of this stage suggests the manipulation of the interiorscape of the wall surfaces as an empty space in the centre of the picture frame, which is enveloped by parts of objects in the perimeter of the images. These part objects constitute parts of the room furniture, but mostly parts of the fire fighting equipment preset in the room. I developed a creative relationship with these items, after responding to the initial feelings of uneasiness and tension caused by their status as strange, unfamiliar objects in a domestic space. In a sense, they were performing a similar action of surveillance upon my presence as the one performed by the cracks of the wall edges due to the peeled pieces of paint. Thus, my act of photographing them unveils the gesture of reversing their gaze of surveillance and transforming it into a creative act.

By projecting my unconscious desires into them as a way of achieving relief from their psychoanalytic status as the obstacles that they were standing for in my mind, I employed them as pure formal elements to serve the purpose of the frame composition. This purpose is invested with the unconscious need to become familiar with the surrounding space and adjust to it by defining an intimate territory. My creative play with those part

⁹ For theoretical support in how to use a view camera see:
Leslie Stroebel, *View Camera Technique*, 5th Edition, Massachusetts: Focal Press, 1986.

objects suggests that they function as demarcation marks, which dissociate the empty wall surface from the rest of the room and define it as a separate territory by ascribing it with a degree of visual significance.

The empty pictorial space of the image becomes then the centre of attraction in relationship to the referentiality of the part objects that surround it. The documentary status of those objects as referents of the utilitarian and social values implied by them is opposed to their abstract status as formal elements that outline the pictorial space of an empty area in the centre of the photographic surface. This empty space oscillates between its indexicality as an identifiable wall surface and its optical status in the internal space of the photograph as a pictorial area void of any references. The potential space of creative play with the object referents of photography in the interiorscape has now shifted in the potential space implied by the relations between the formal elements of the picture.

These sets of photographs present a double world of perception; the objective world of objects and the optical world of visual forms; the one struggling against the other in a creative abstract tension on the photographic surface. The distance between the two worlds seems to be shorter, but the tension created to comprehend the transition from one to the other is greater. This is due to the strong narrative implied by the part objects, that can be more confusing than clarifying of the abstract problem presented.

C.2 The Abstract Maps

This stage is based specifically on the development of the idea of *mapping* the space by creating pieces of *abstract map* sketches, two of which I materialized as a kind of site specific photographic installation on a wall surface. The abstract maps comprise the combination of previously taken photographs with arbitrarily drawn lines and graphic marks around their wall surrounding space.

The particular idea suggested by these pieces is about the construction of a map for navigation around the photographs in an environment that would embrace them with trust by providing support to them as well as freedom. This is evident from the discreet

presence of the black horizontal, vertical and diagonal lines around the images, which disclose their supportive role, as well as their role as a means of linking the images together in a whole. At the same time these lines allow for the images' autonomous existence and secure them with spaciousness around them.

The psychoanalytic framework of ideas that underpin the construction of such pieces points to the parallel function of the potential space for the infant, who according to Winnicott can grow to a new autonomous human child only in the potential space of trust and reliability that are offered to the baby by the mother.¹⁰ In Winnicott's account, the potential space of experience is the area responsible for creative playing and cultural experience.¹¹

The *site specificity*¹² of these installation pieces depends on the dimensions of the actual room and ascribes the work a flexible character. Its flexibility implies that the installation can follow the materialization of many possibilities according to the specificity of the space where it is likely to be installed each time. It also suggests an association with the psychoanalytic dimensions invested in the construction of the work, which imply the potential for playing with the real space and adapting to it.

C.3 The Internal Maps (thread pieces)

Following the stage of mapping the space around the photograph, my practice turned to the direction of mapping the space within the image based on my intervention on the wall surface as the object-referent of the photographs. This resulted in the doubling of the picture plane as regards the existing details in the original site, namely the cracks, dust, scratches, and the details added by me when performing the gesture of constructing an abstract internal guide of navigation and orientation in that space. The idea of the

¹⁰ D.W. Winnicott, *Playing & Reality*, op. cit., p. 108.

See also: D.W. Winnicott, 'Living Creatively', in Clare Winnicott, Ray Shepherd, Madeleine Davis, ed., *Home is where we start: Essays by a psychoanalyst*, London: Penguin Books, 1990.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 107.

¹² For ideas regarding installations and sites see: Andrew Benjamin, *Object Painting*, Great Britain: Academy Editions, 1994.

intentional marking of the area of reference by the use of pencil or thread originated in the utilization of the masking tape as an auxiliary target of focus.

This strategy of the performative subtle intervention in the visible suggests the act of filling up the space by creating many potential spatial relationships between its existing elements and those I imported myself. Furthermore, it implies the potential created by the playful handling of the interiorscape, which aimed at resolving the problems that emerged during the creative interaction with the room space.

The working through of this performative creative process can be seen as taking place within an intermediate area of creativity between the reality world of reference and a newly constructed optical reality, which enabled a restoration and reconciliation of the existing actual space. This intermediate area is best described by the properties of the potential space as a model of abstraction applied to the creativity phase. In Winnicott's account, "the baby's separating-out of the world of objects from the self is achieved only through the absence of the space between; the potential space being filled."¹³ In this respect, the feeling of absence in the potential space between the infant and the mother asks for restoration of the emptiness created within that area. Playing creatively with the real as a way of achieving restoration fills up the potential space and turns its emptiness into fullness, it therefore also facilitates the adaptation of a grown integrated individual to the external world of experience. The internal maps constitute a culmination of my exploration in seeking for a fusion of spacescapes with mindscapes. They have a diagrammatic iconic function, as they can be seen as diagrams of the mind that represent this creative process.

In a parallel manner, the potential space of my creative process in this case functions as a bridge that facilitates the passage between two areas: from the problematic grounds of the unconscious reception of the surrounding's uneasy signals, to the area of managing the problems through a creative, playful, performative gesture towards building an optical reality that implies adaptation and successful spatial orientation.

¹³ D.W. Winnicott, *Playing & Reality*, op. cit., p. 108.

In this sense, the empty pictorial space of the photograph becomes full by demonstrating an ambiguity as a space of performance between the two aspects of the photographic sign; as index and the as icon. This performance takes place as a play with the real between the index and the icon. The performative sign of the index of a personal intervention, the index and icon of a piece of thread and the icon of a graphical mark comprise this play. My gesture of intervening on the wall surface with a piece of thread signifies a performative action, which defines the wall surface as a playground. In this playground, playing takes place between the existing indexes on the wall, including the wall as such, and the index of the thread, which I carefully arrange in relation to the existing indexes, namely paint, dust, crack marks. The performative index of my intervening gesture shifts its status from being a performative sign to becoming a photographic sign. This photographic sign points to the piece of thread and has a visual likeness with a thread. Despite its indexical relationship to the referent of the thread, its iconic status also shifts to resemble a graphical linear mark, which functions as a formal element on the pictorial photographic space.

This is the play with the real. It starts from my personal performance with my surrounding space, the reality world, and becomes a play between the indexical and iconic aspects of the photographic sign. This play takes place in the intermediate space of potential space, as the generator of abstraction in my images, and creates a bridge between the referentiality of the photograph and its pictoriality. The ambiguity between index and icon is created by the back and forth movements in this intermediate space. The play between index and icon is invested with the psychic dimension of the play, which happens in the potential space between my internal and external world. This is, then, how the space of the internal maps appears to be invested with this psychic dimension. This is the empty space of my photographs, which appears full as I extensively described in the relevant chapter of this thesis.

Taking into account how my research project was developed throughout all the stages of the creative process, it becomes obvious how the employment of the psychoanalytic model of transitional phenomena based on object-relations contributes to the

understanding of my practice. The analysis of the different stages of the creative process demonstrates clearly that the employment of this model is used as a methodological tool to develop an investigation of the photographic space. Within this context, the use of Transitional Phenomena provides us with a new frame of key concepts that help in understanding the problem of photographic abstraction.

D. PORTFOLIO - Creative process images

First Stage

From Series *NOT ALLOWED* – starting point for my project



URBANSCAPE - 35mm digital images

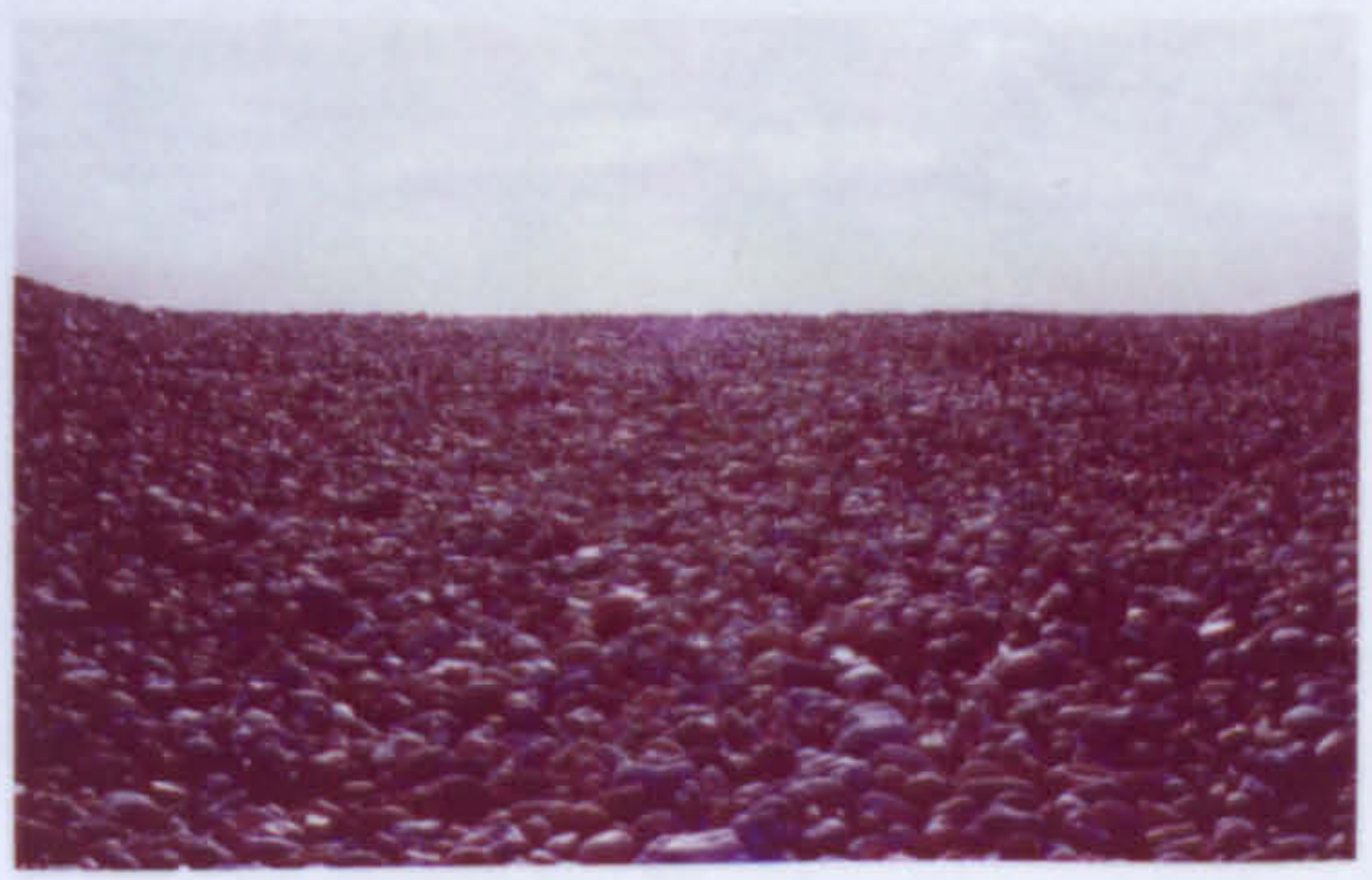


SEASCAPES - 35mm film images



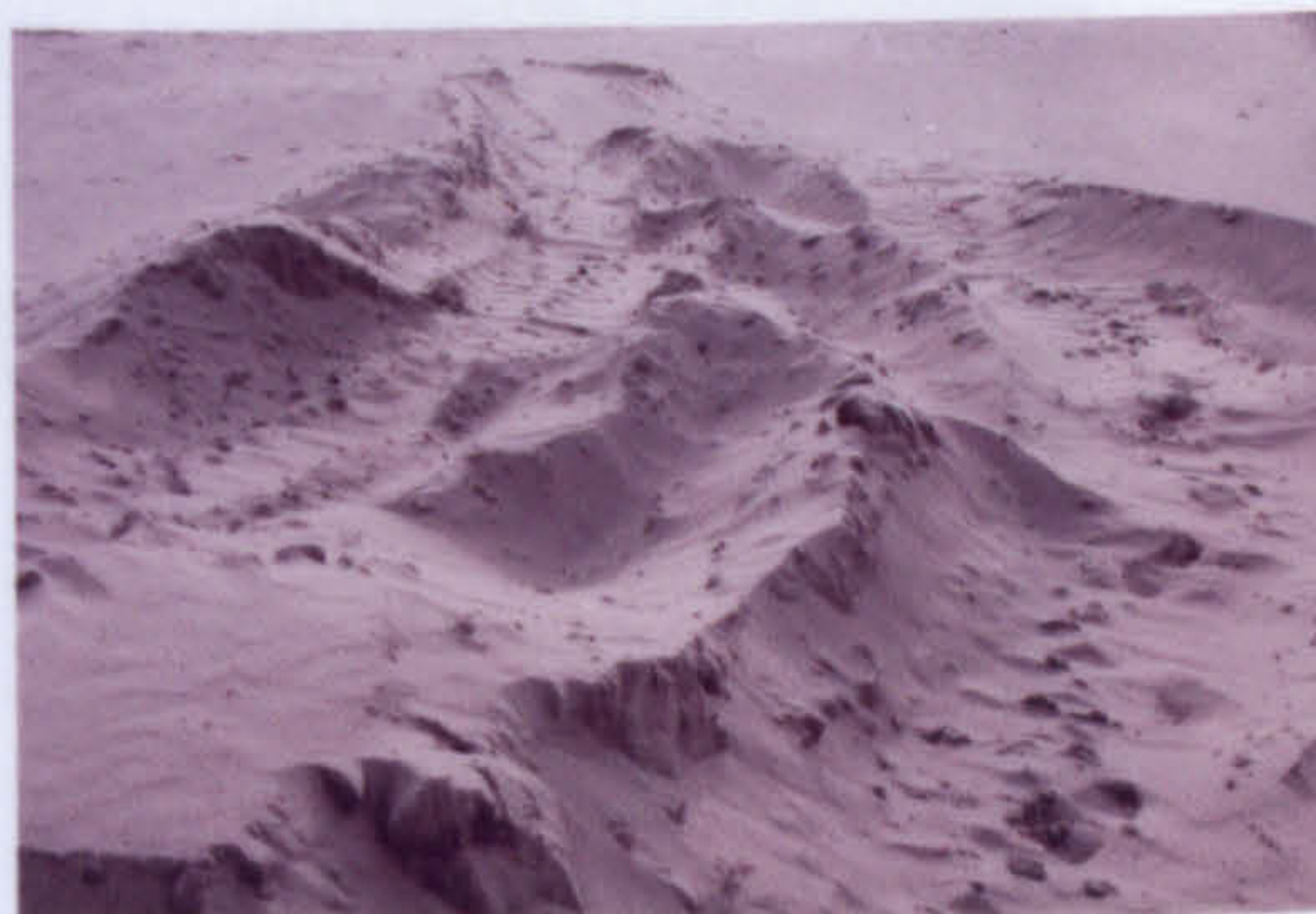
PEBBLE FIELD - 35mm film images

SET 1



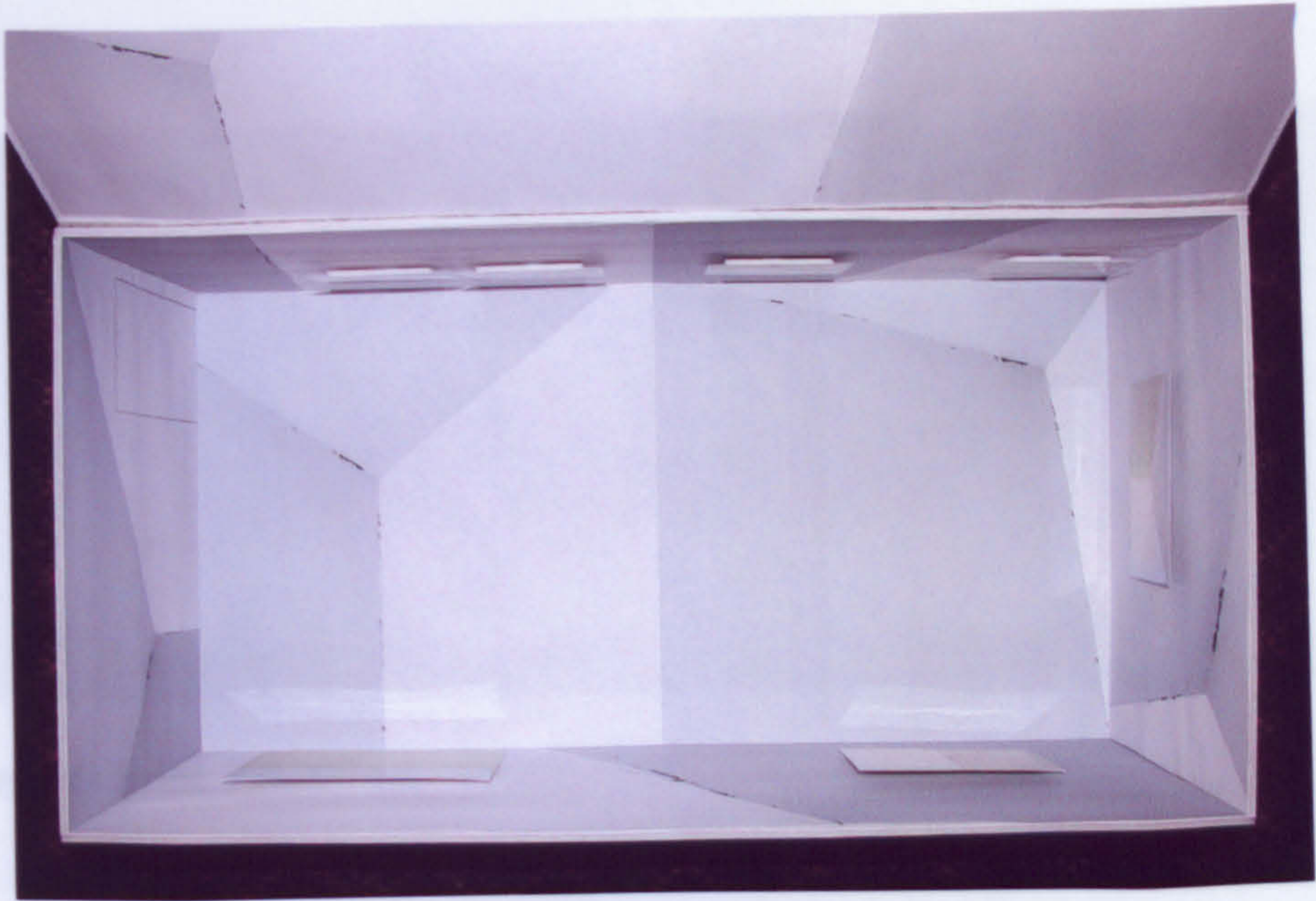
PEBBLE FIELD - 35mm digital images

SET 2



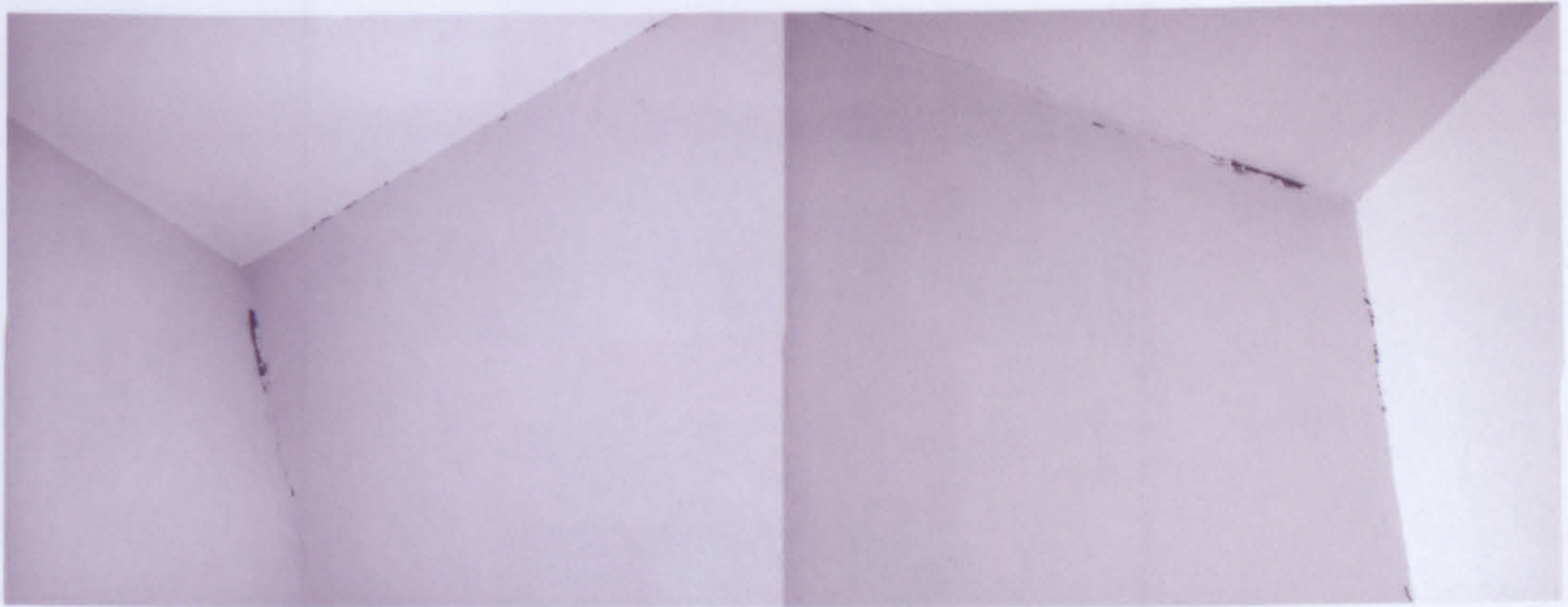
Second Stage

THE MODEL ROOM

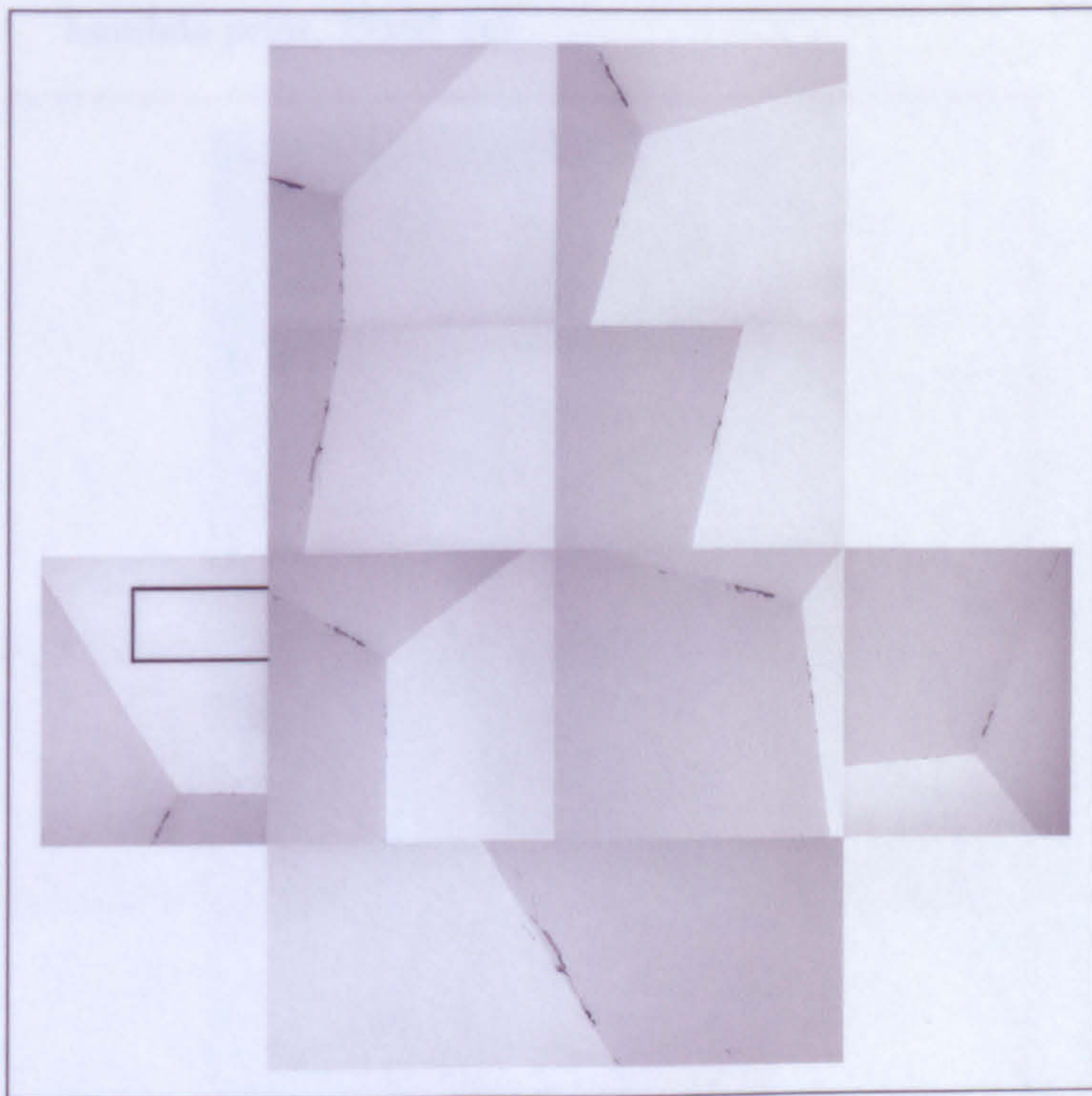


THE UNFOLDED ROOM

A set of five images presented in my Mphil upgrade exhibition
“The Potential Space”

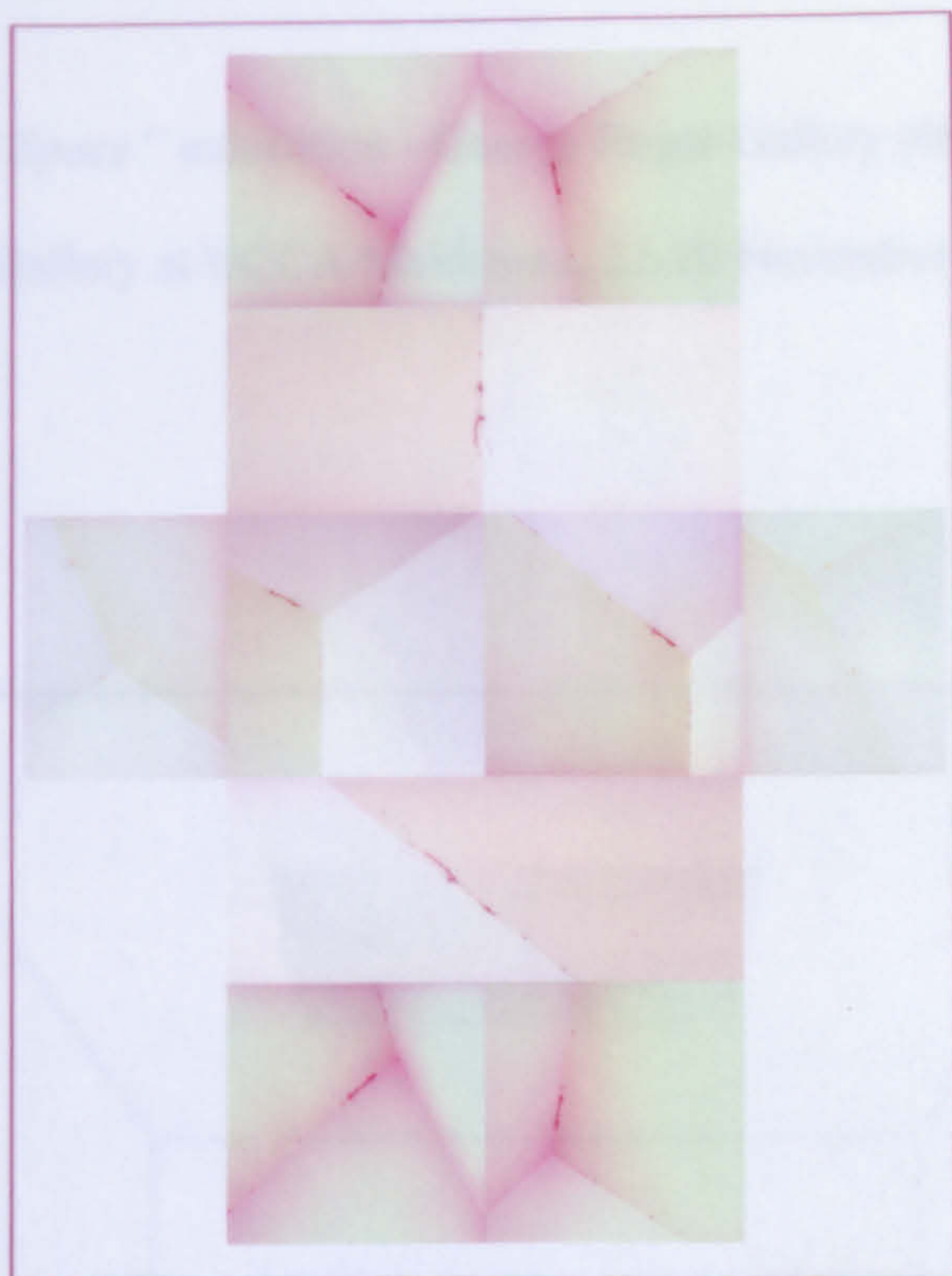


Lambda print, 75x200 cm

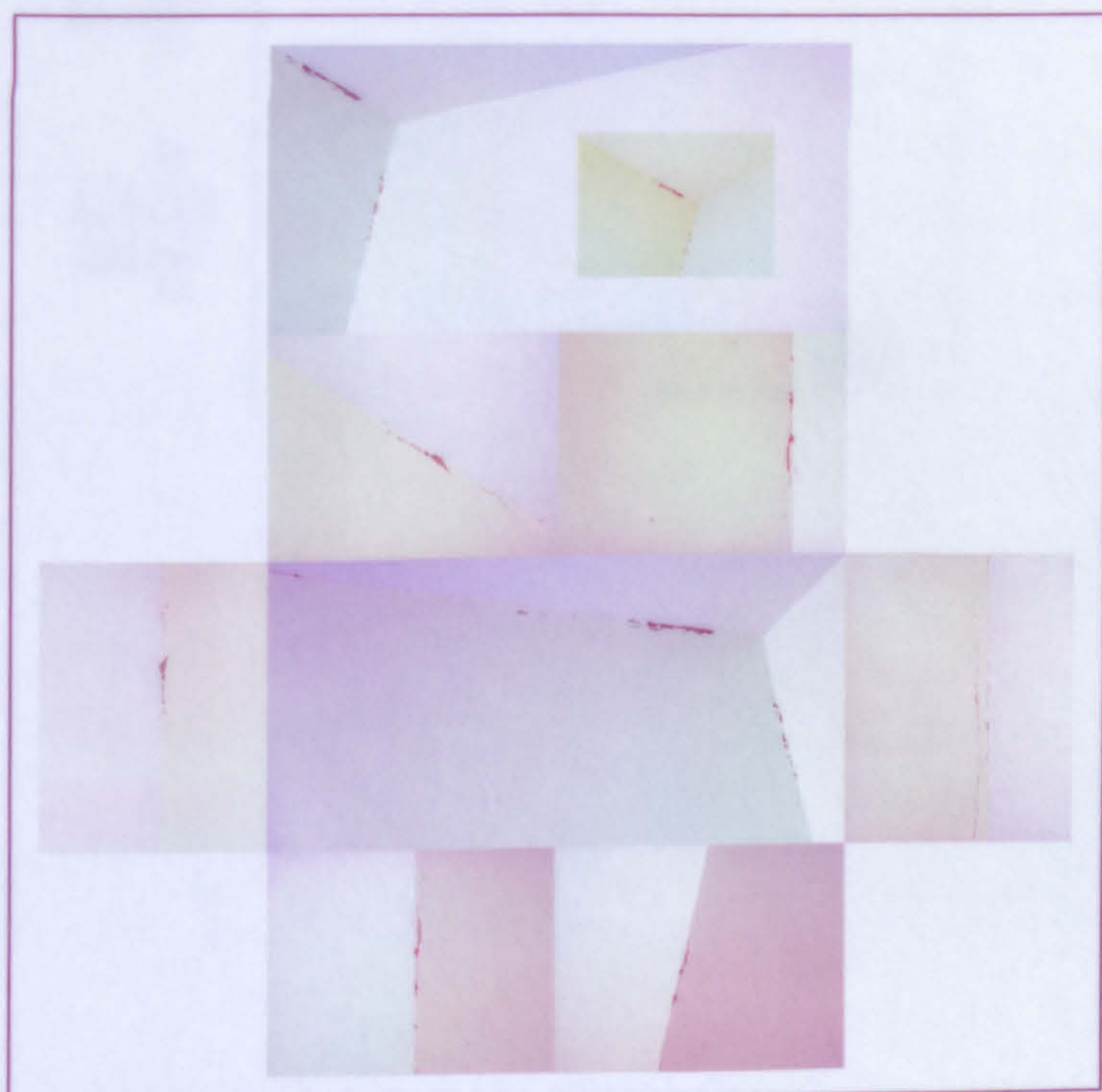


Lambda print, 75x75 cm

THE UNFOLDED ROOM



Lambda print, 75x95 cm

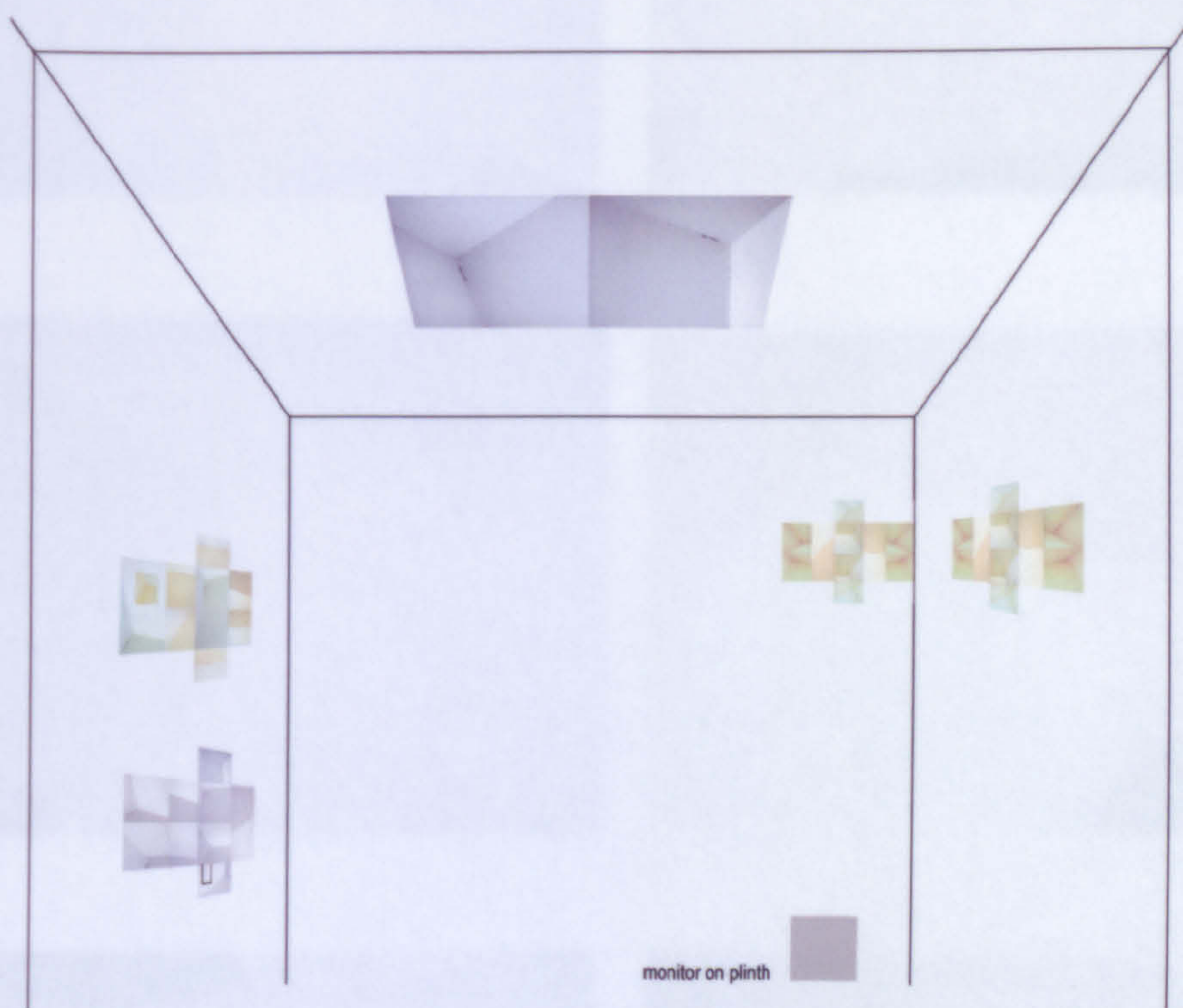


Lambda print, 75x75 cm

THE UNFOLDED ROOM

“The Potential Space” exhibition - George Roger Gallery plan

George Roger Gallery at UCCA Maidstone, 22-26 November 2004



Third Stage

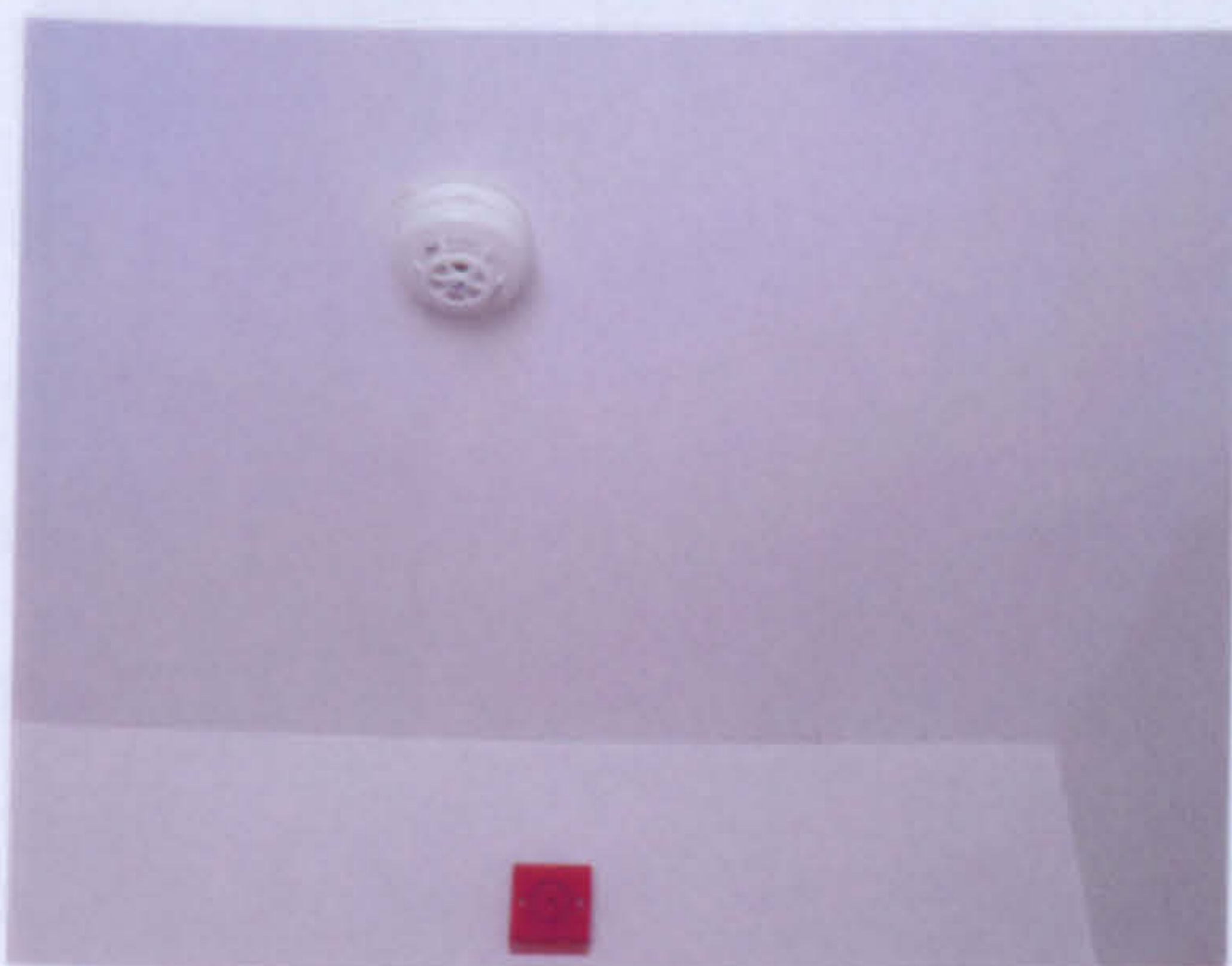
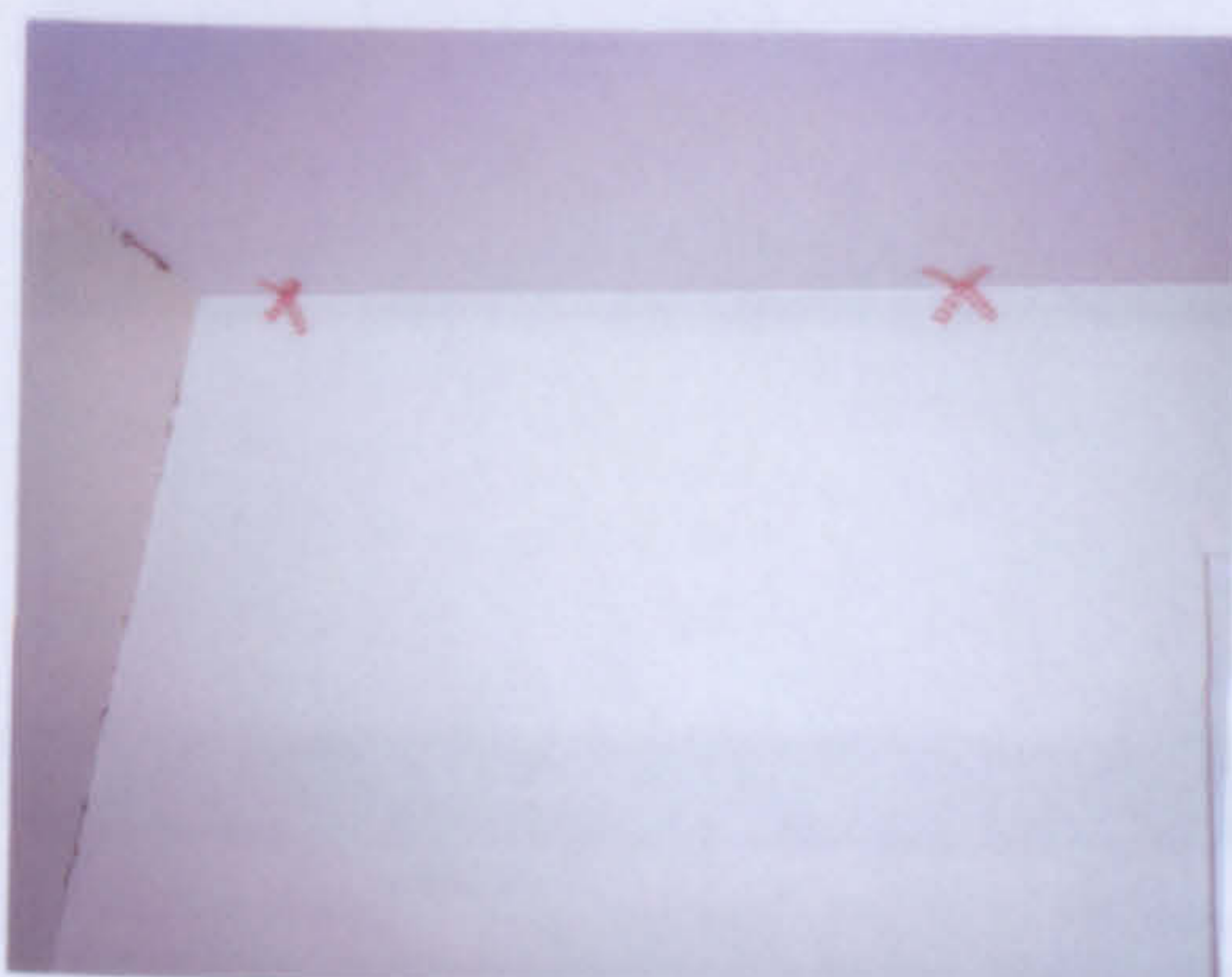
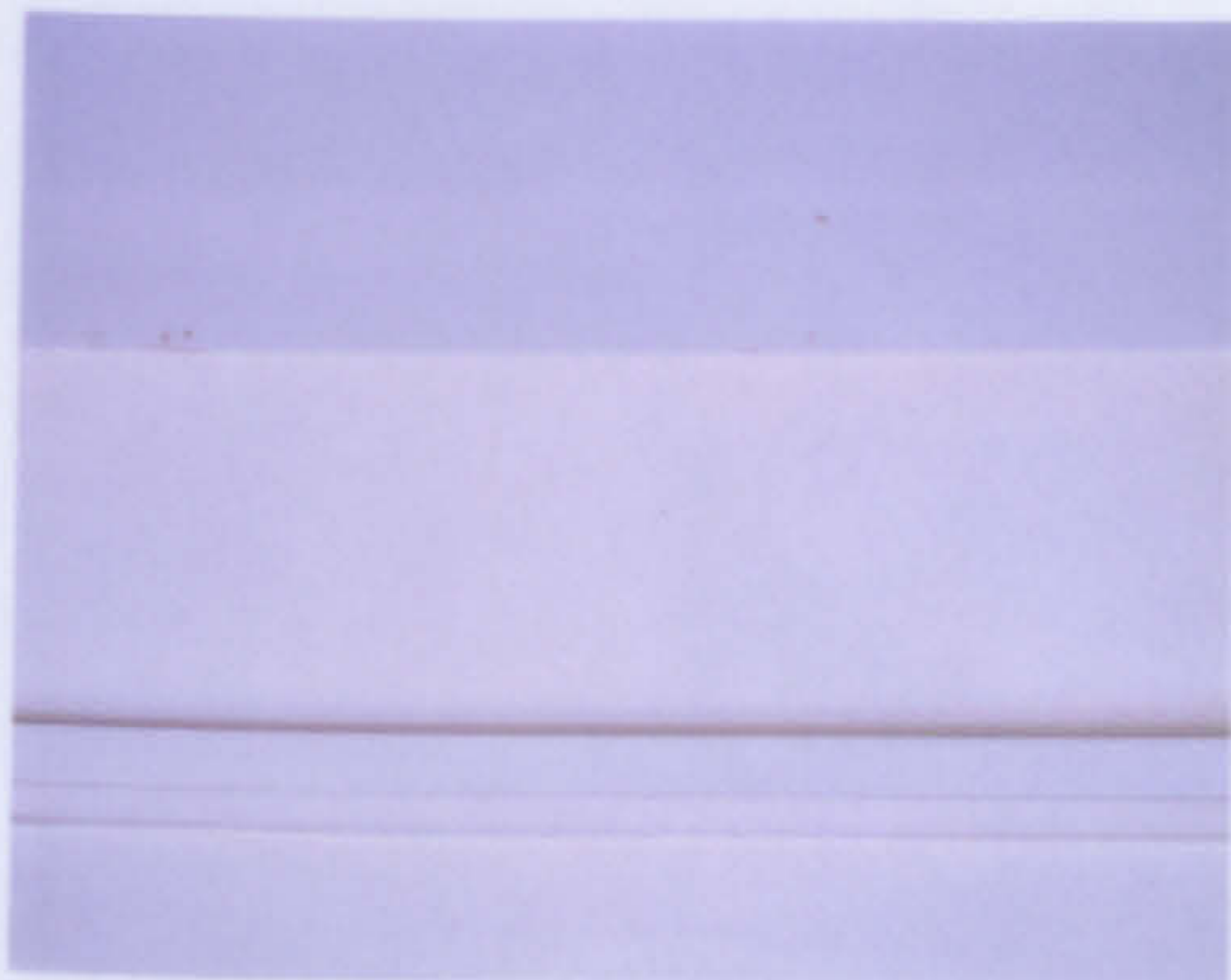
THE PART OBJECTS

SET 1



THE PART OBJECTS

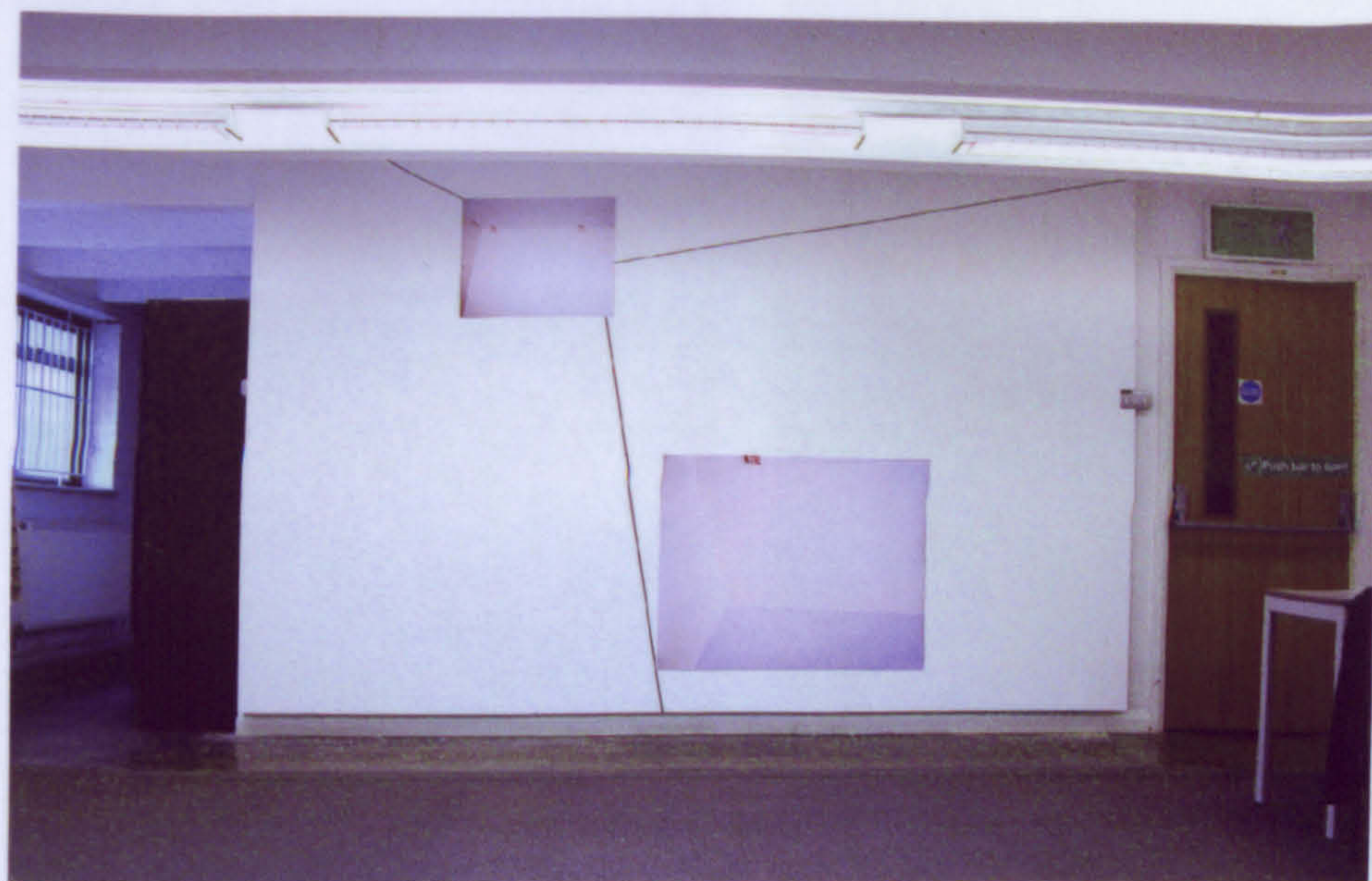
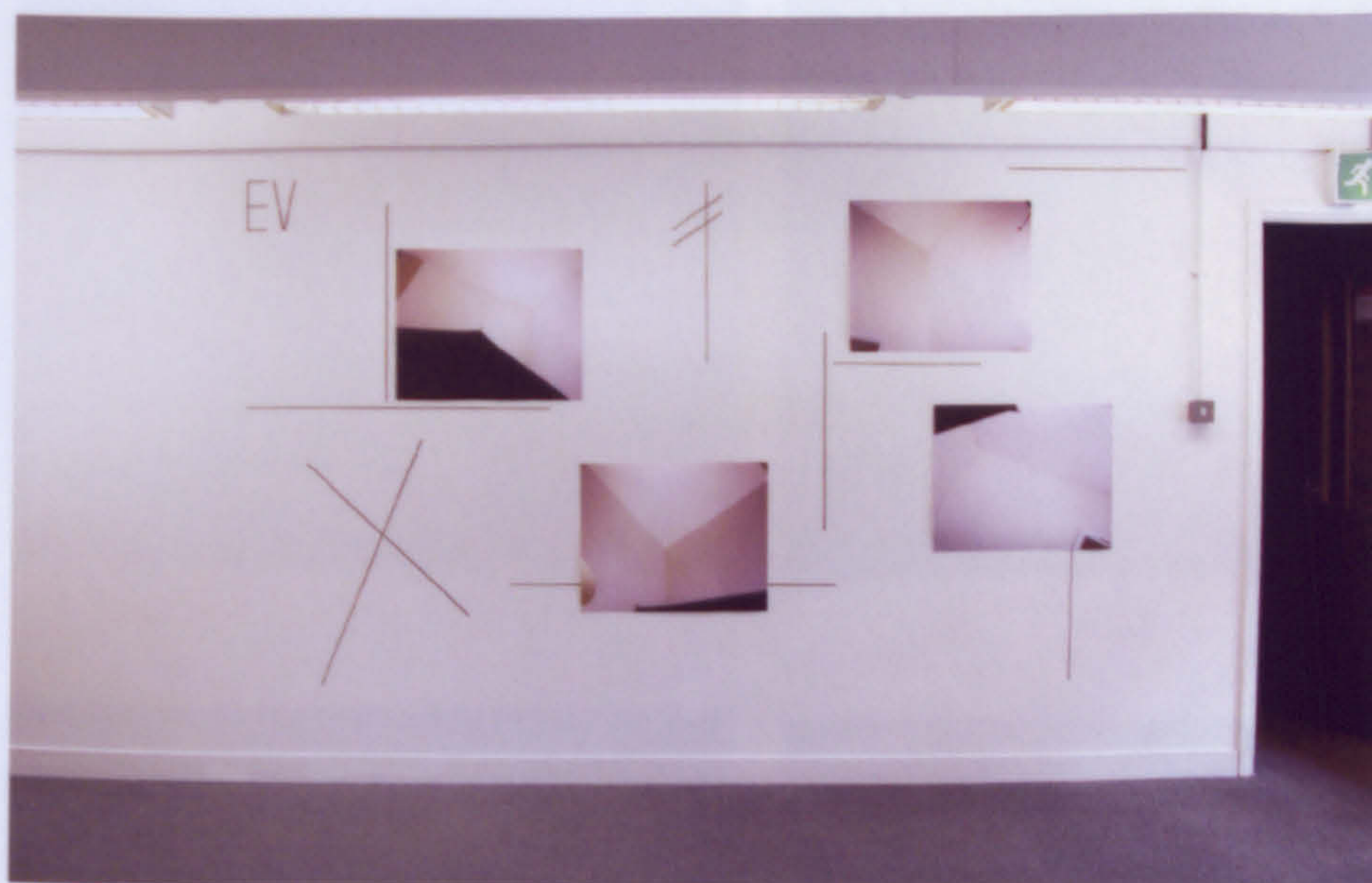
SET 2



THE ABSTRACT MAPS

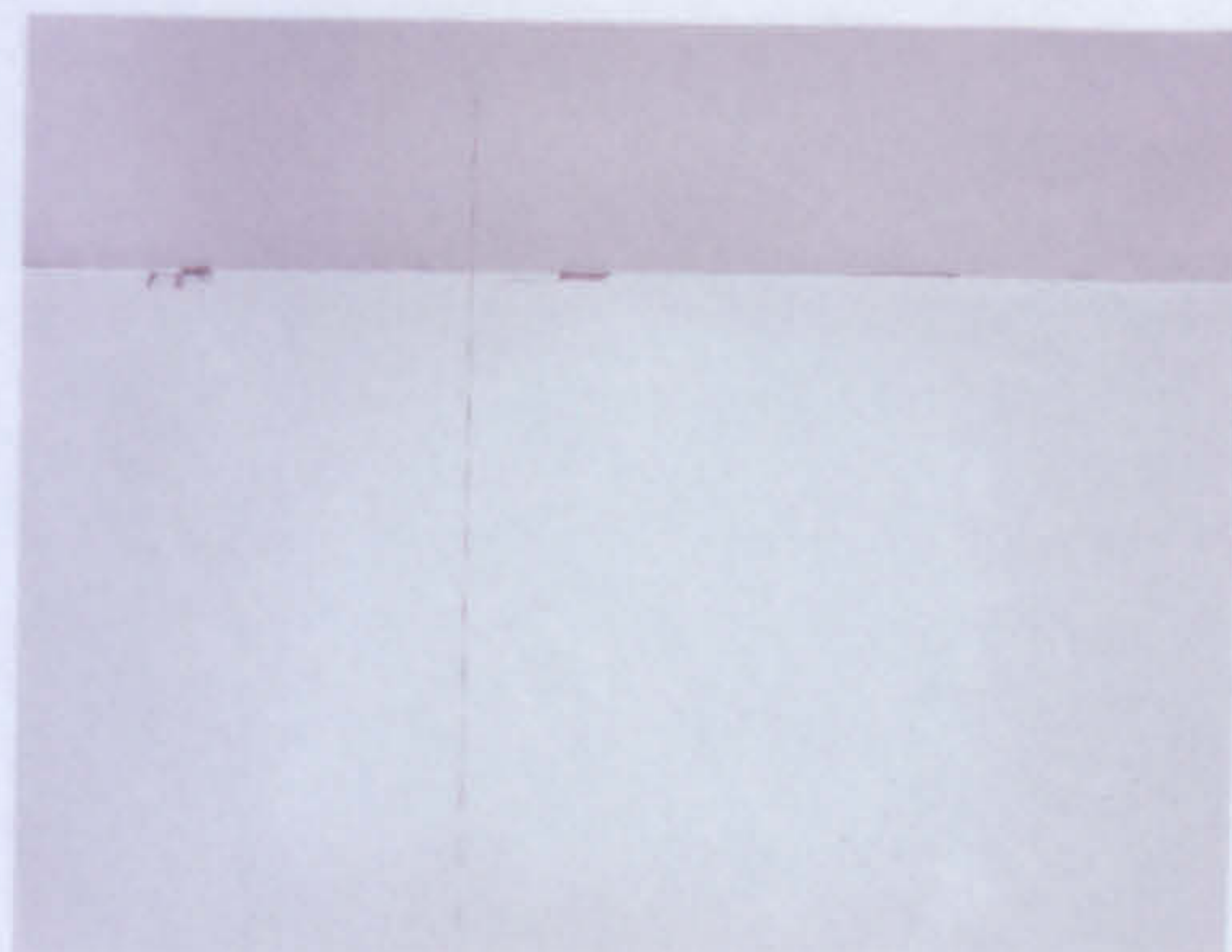
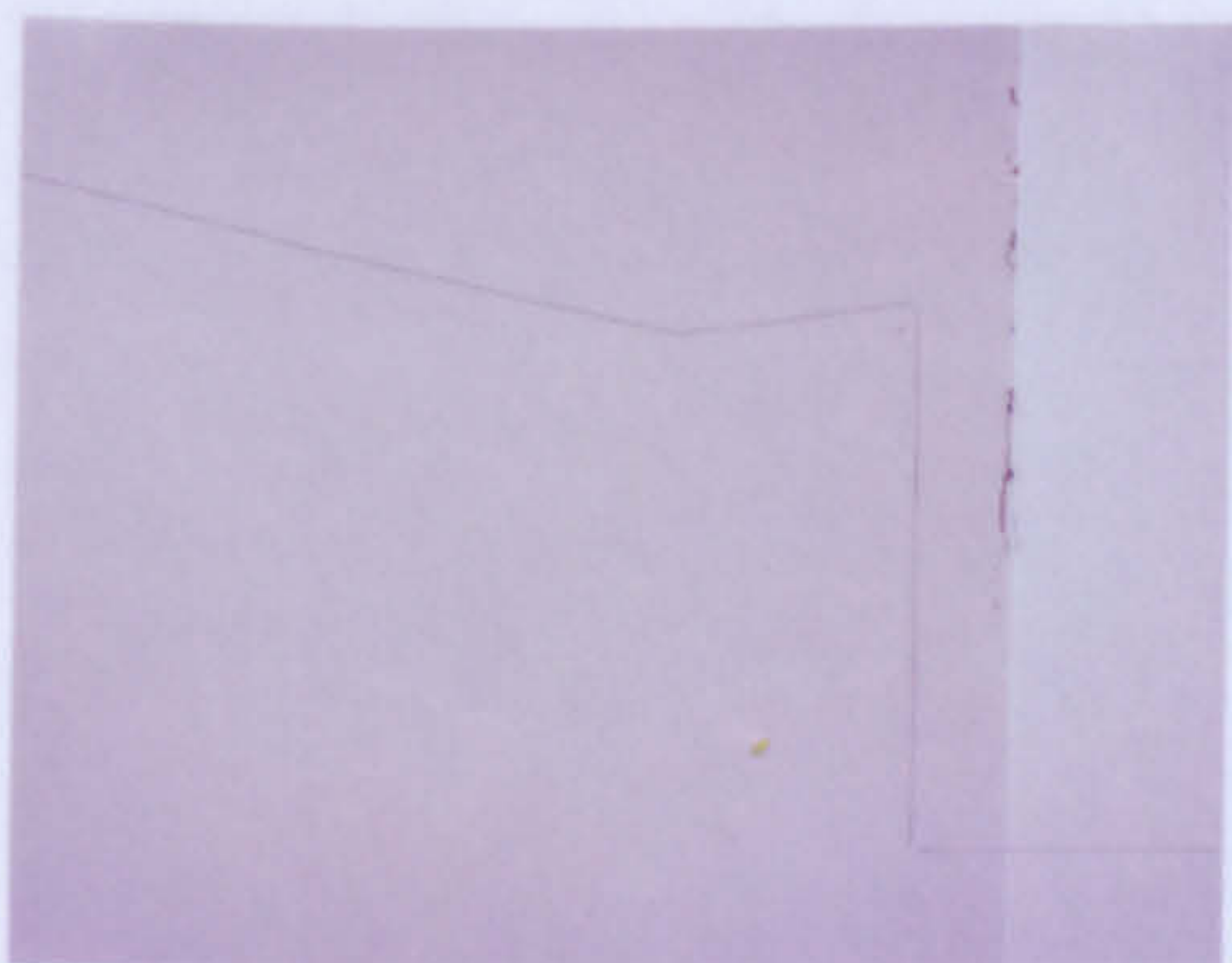
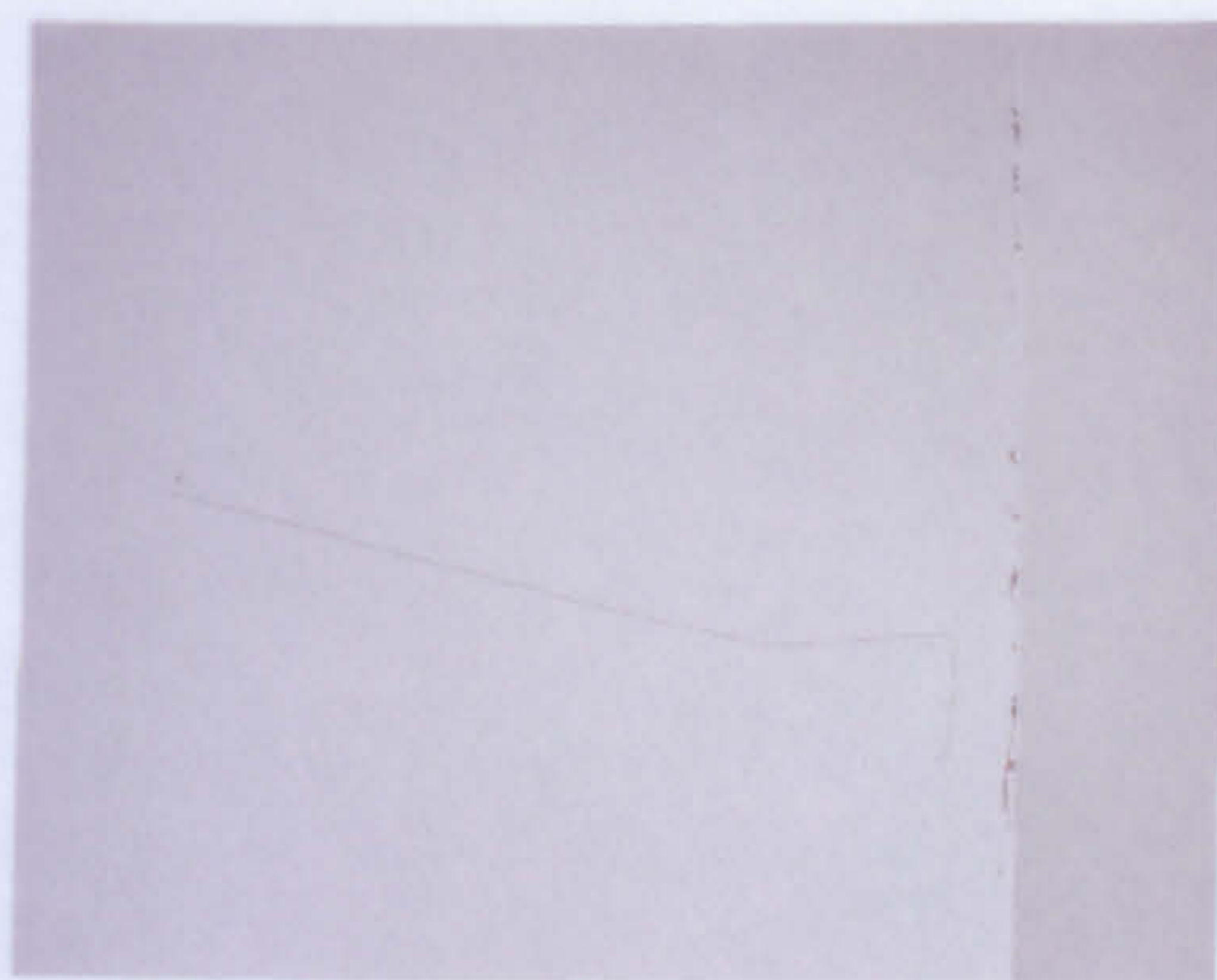
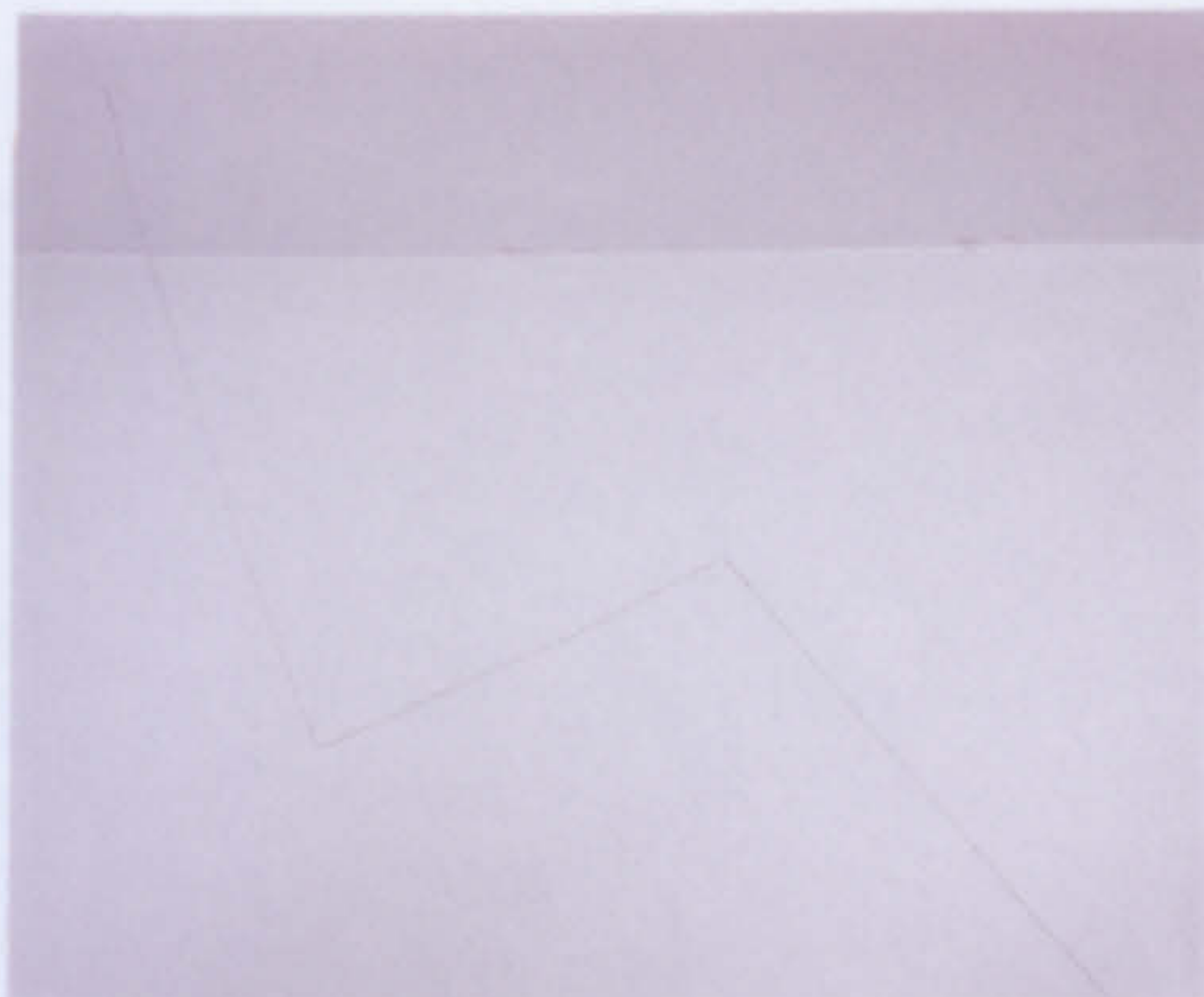
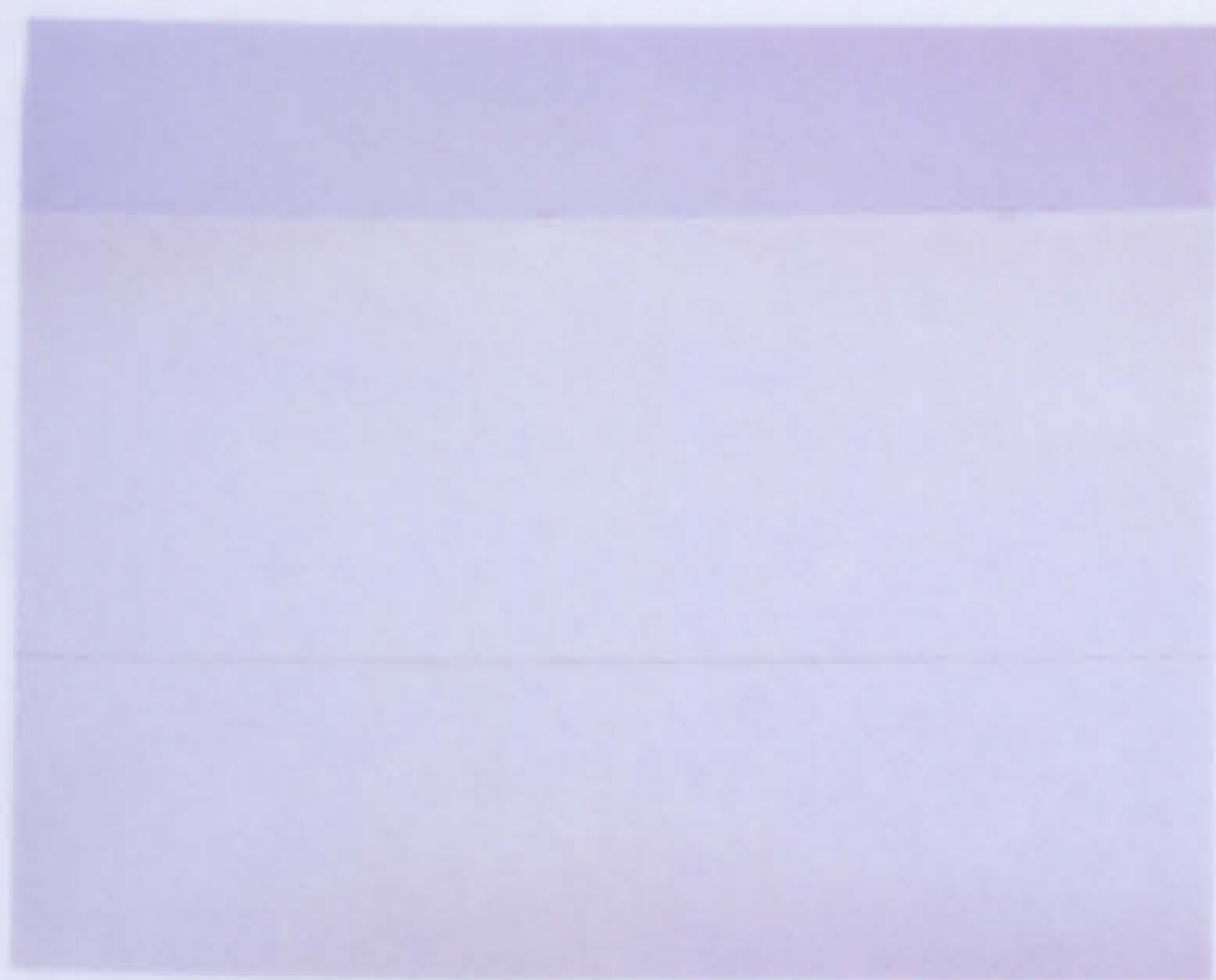
Installation of two of the *abstract maps* sketches

MA Research Baseroom at UCCA Maidstone 7/7/2005



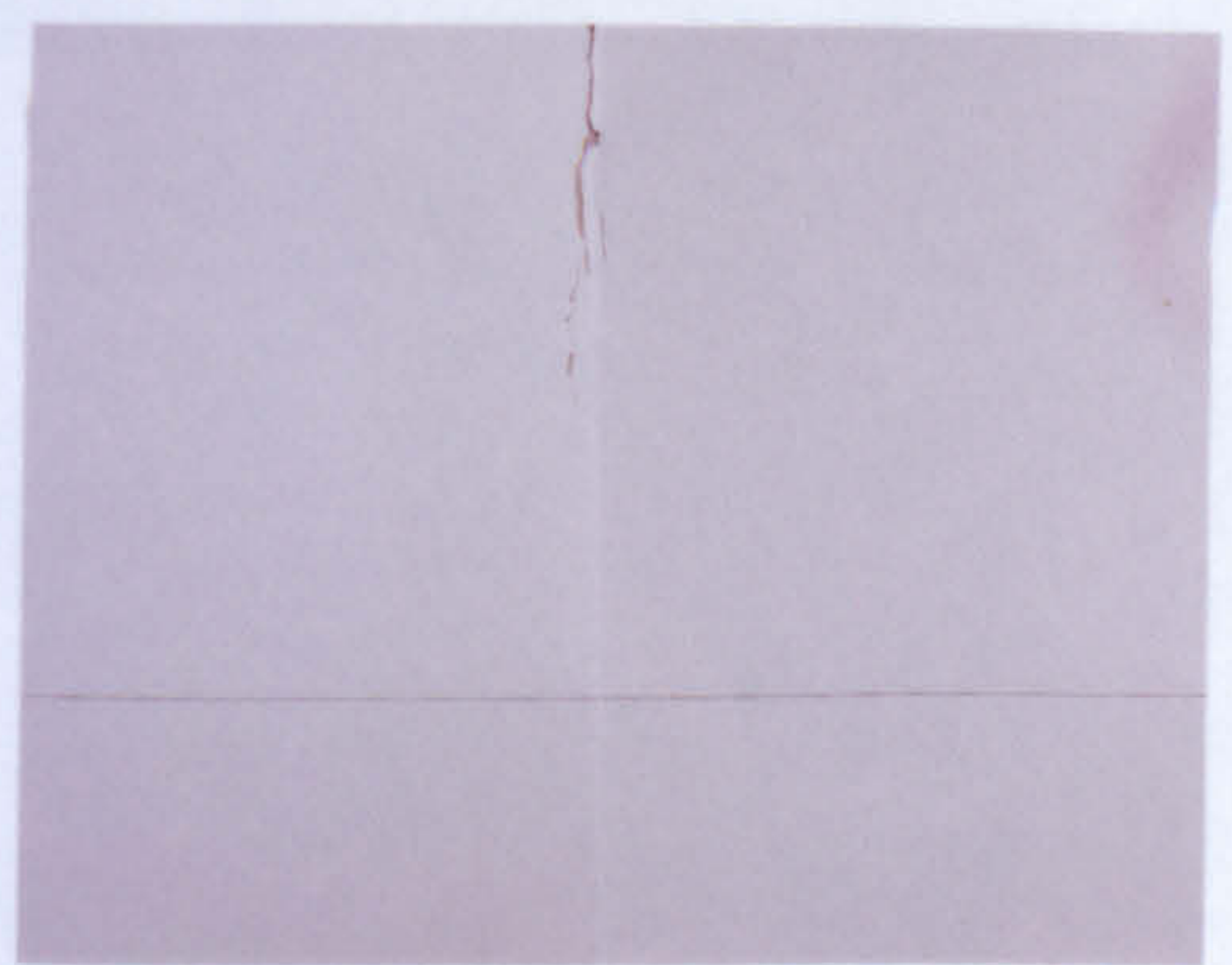
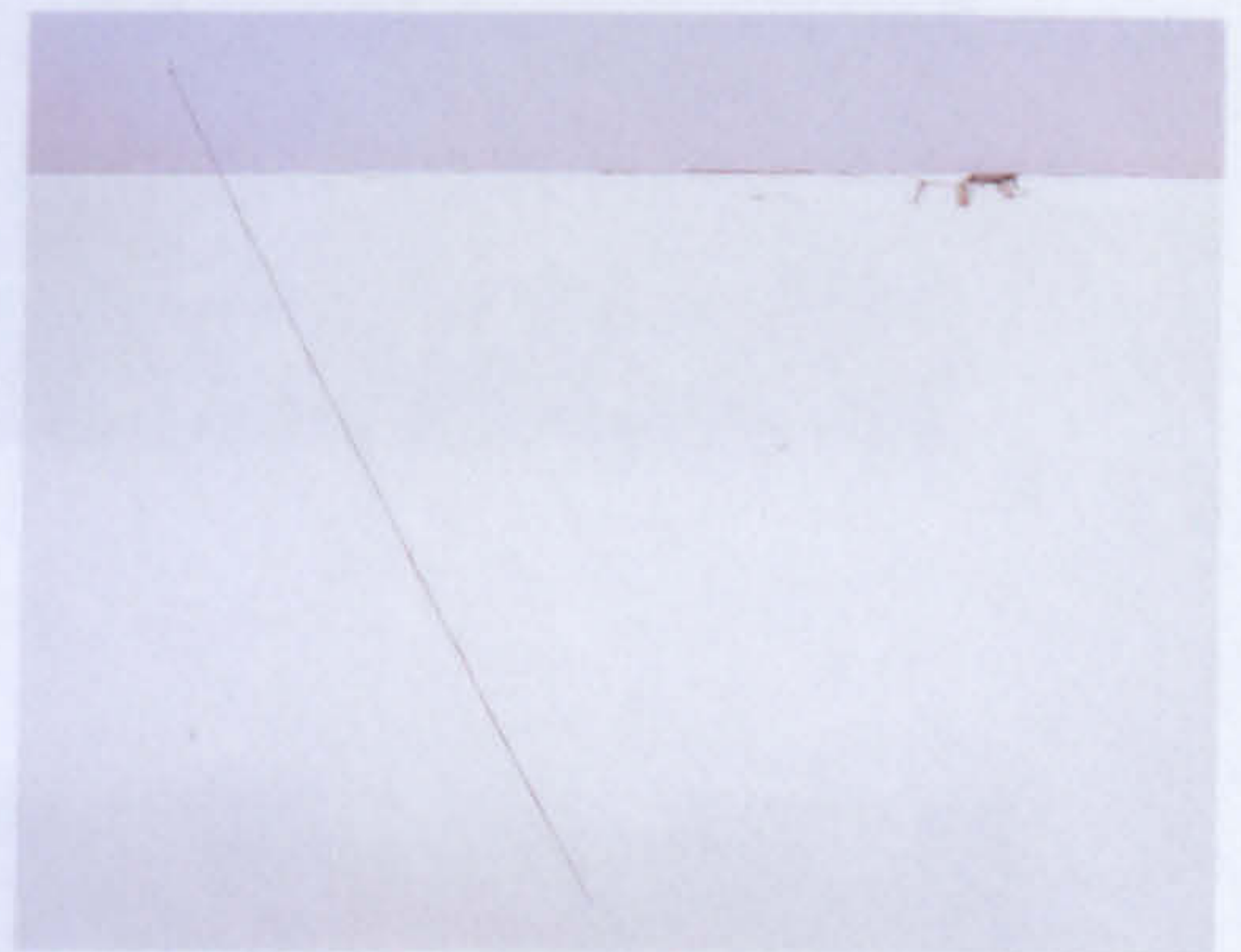
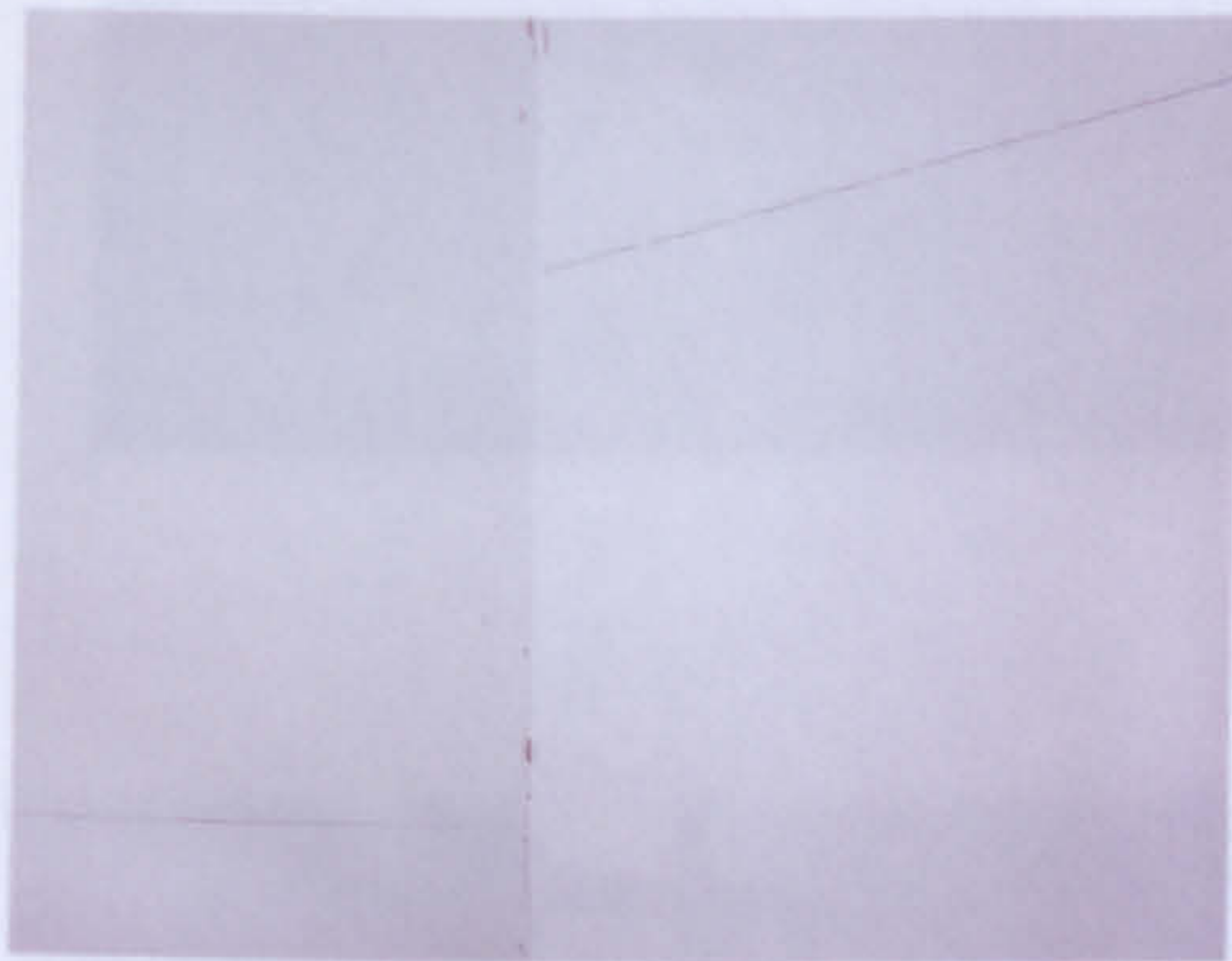
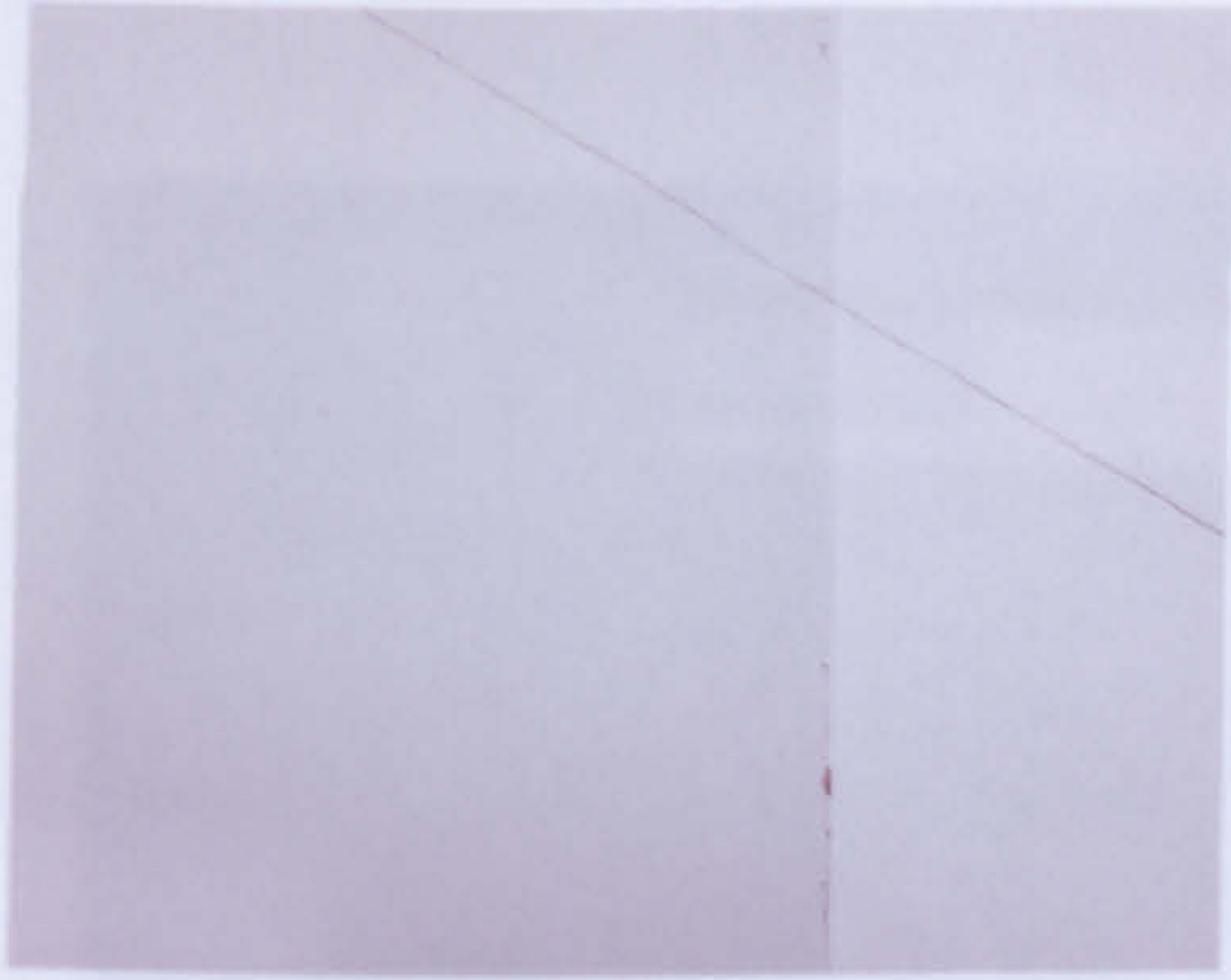
THE INTERNAL MAPS (THREAD PIECES)

SET 1



THE INTERNAL MAPS (THREAD PIECES)

SET 2



THE FINAL EXHIBITION

'Empty Space'

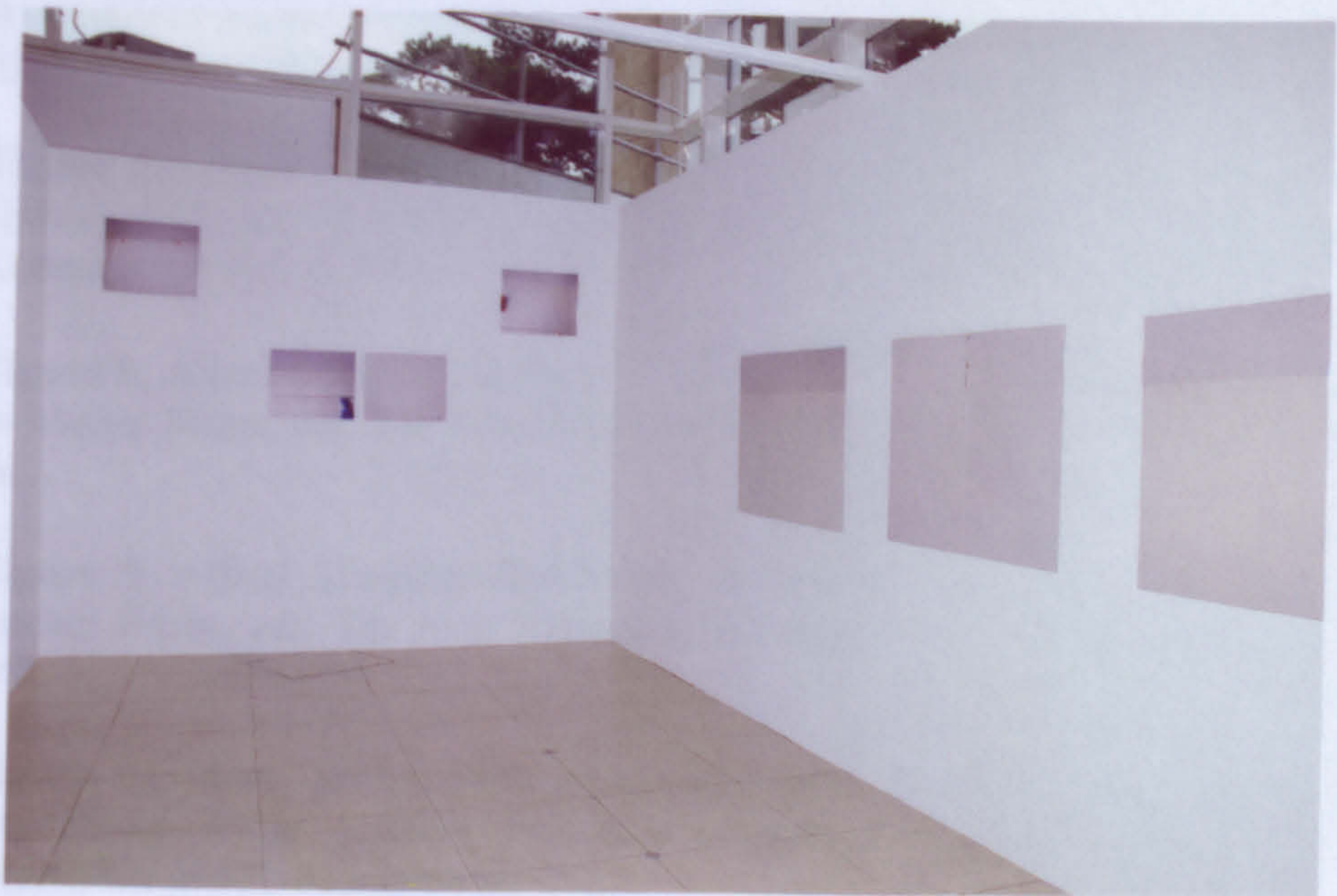
George Rodger Gallery at UCCA Maidstone, 6-19 December 2008



THE FINAL EXHIBITION

'Empty Space'

George Rodger Gallery at UCCA Maidstone, 6-19 December 2008



LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

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