# THE ELUSIVE SUBJECT

**Representing the Abstract and Unseen History of Place with Photography**

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***Royal College of Art***
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*A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. I confirm that the work presented here is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.*

Author’s Declaration

During the period of registered study in which this thesis was prepared the author has not been registered for any other academic award or qualification. The material included in the thesis has not been submitted wholly or in part for any academic award or qualification other than that for which it is now submitted.

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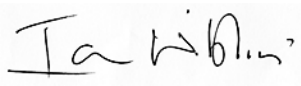

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Ian Wiblin, June 2022

**The Elusive Subject: Representing the Abstract and Unseen History of Place with Photography**

How can a building be photographed in ways that go beyond description to invite readings that engage the viewer with abstract notions of place and its unseen political and social history?

## Abstract

This PhD is by practice. Central to its research is Bertolt Brecht's criticism of photography, expressed through an imagined photograph showing the exterior of a factory building, in terms of its limited ability to reveal social conditions. The significance of materiality, in the form of human labour, to Brecht's critique can be revaluated in the light of current theories of New Materialism. Such thinking demands a deeper critical enquiry into material concerns – extending here to the material essences that determine and sustain the materiality of human labour itself. This theoretical position, adopted from new materialism, is applied to the discussion of the thesis and the methodologies of the practice. Within this framework, the research has sought to identify strategies variously employing photographic media and other elements that recognise the potential of new materialist thinking and which can achieve the depth of revelation demanded by Brecht.

A range of historical and contemporary photographic and other works, those of Robert Smithson and Bernd and Hilla Becher foremost among them, have been critiqued in part through the filter of new materialism to reveal the deeper material properties impacting upon their making and appearance. The results of this enquiry have been tested through methodologies formulated and applied in practice to the exterior of a specific architectural structure representative of Brecht's factory. The building chosen, the Bank of England, though not a factory is a workplace loaded with historical, architectural, political and social significance. The resulting works, informed by concepts developed within new materialism and realised in photography and digital video, aim to invite interpretation engaging the viewer with material essences of the Bank – both as a structure and as an institution – including such essences that make tangible abstract notions of power, wealth and credit. In this way, the developed

methodologies of practice have sought to reconnect the Bank building to the material essences of its history and of its site, thus linking, in theoretical terms, the historical materialism of Walter Benjamin with new materialism.

The research demonstrates that theories of new materialism can be usefully applied to the field of photography – to its critique and to the formulation of working methodologies within practice. Ideas of new materialism have developed over the last decade (in areas such as feminism and ecology) but have yet to be applied to photography. Thus, the mapping of new materialist thinking onto photography and photographic practice achieved within this research represents a contribution to knowledge that moves photographic theory forward.

## CONTENTS

## Acknowledgements

The encouragement and enthusiasm of the late A. L. Rees, my initial supervisor, was greatly valued – as were the lively seminars discussions he led. I am also very grateful for the support, insight and patience of supervisors Nicky Hamlyn and Susan Butler. Thanks also to Anthea Kennedy for her support and advice, and her assistance with the video work in particular.

## List of Illustrations

## Appendix:

**A note on the Glossary and its content** (See pages 177 to 190)

Although I have largely aimed to make explicit, within the thesis discussion, the meaning and context of the terms used, short definitions are provided within the Glossary – located in the thesis as detailed above. A large number of terms covered are drawn from the relatively recent theory of new materialism that is central to the enquiry of the study. Entries are also included that reference nomenclature associated with specific art and philosophical movements referred to in the text. Given the intrusive length of the glossary, although the content is selective, it is inserted towards the end of the thesis, rather than here.

## Introduction

> As Brecht says: "The situation is complicated by the fact that less than ever does the mere reflection of reality reveal anything about reality. A photograph of the Krupp works or the A.E.G. tells us next to nothing about these institutions. Actual reality has slipped into the functional. The reification of human relations – the factory, say – means that they are no longer explicit. So something must in fact be *built up*, something artificial, posed." (Benjamin, 1994, p.255)[1]

Bertolt Brecht's criticism of photography, as reported in Walter Benjamin's essay, *A Small History of Photography* (1931), will serve as a text against which the research and outcomes of this study can be tested. In terms of content and likely form, the hypothetical photographic examples to which Brecht alludes mirror the photography that is central to this study – recording, largely in a straight-forwardly frontal kind of way, architectural structures of various kinds. The limited ability, as identified by Brecht, of photography to reflect reality is thus central to this study.

If human relations are the *subject* of the imagined photograph that is Brecht's example, the impoverishment of that subject through photography's effect – slipping undisclosed human reality into the photographically seen functional reality of a factory exterior – suggests, if placed in more philosophical terms, the *elusiveness* of that subject (its reality remaining undefined). In terms of its own function, a photograph of a factory building is limited, Brecht seems to imply, to the simple denoting of a place of work. The deeper reality of that subject – to which Brecht alludes – being the unseen materiality and physicality of human labour and, more particularly, the invisible or abstract mental and sociological effects of such controlling and exploitative labour, as orientated within the dominant ideology of capitalism. A photograph of a factory, addressing Brecht's criticism, should cut through the building's visible stone, concrete,

[1] Esther Leslie identifies that Benjamin is quoting from Brecht's text *Threepenny Trial* (1931) (Leslie, 2015, p.104). Although Leslie also translates Brecht's words, I have used a previous translation, as referenced above, this being the one I first encountered. A source in German is identified by Marc Silberman (in 1987, p.450).

iron and glass construction and should animate, in critical terms, the materialities of otherwise mundane labour. The overall modus operandi of the practice of this project is pursued with the intent of transcending photography's functional regard for its subject, so refuting the pacifying effect of reification. I progress this photographic enquiry acknowledging that my work sits outside modes of contemporary documentary practice that seek the distance of objectivity. However, I am still concerned with aspects of visual reporting, through photography, utilising the medium's recognised superficial technical ability to provide mimicked representations of reality. Such reporting, for the purposes of this research, is allied with unobscured or undisguised subjectivity. Although working in concordance with Brecht's example, in that I am photographing a building, my visual method of representing that object through photography is, then, very different to that which his account of a photographically portrayed factory seems to suggest. A lack of anchoring, or of certainty, in terms of subject and intent, such as can be inherent to subjectively authored photographic practice, is embraced within the practice – with the aim of animating, rather than ossifying, content. This subjectively engineered, within the practising of practice, opening of the photographs is thus intended to invite the elusive subject (such as remains invisible in Brecht's critique) to suggest itself to the viewer. This is the philosophically informed spirit in which the practice has been pursued. As part of its ambition towards the seeking of new knowledge, the study tests the value to thinking and making photography of – largely philosophical – theory oriented within the field of new materialism. This so materially infused and predicated methodology of practice, and the manner of its regard for its direct subject – the thing photographed – is further elucidated later within this introductory text. The practice and the content of this thesis, then, moves towards, tests and reflects upon, a philosophical reconfiguring of the essential nature of photography – with concerns of matter very much at the core of the study. This rethinking of photography in terms of matter, through the matter of making, is an avenue travelled in search the revelation of new knowledge.

As Brecht's criticism suggests, such reification, in terms of its limiting effect, can be a trap for photography, within the genre of documentary in particular – as briefly introduced here. It is possible to identify, within a still dominant area of contemporary

documentary photographic practice, an adherence to particular long-established visual conventions upheld within apparently rigorous methodologies. These conventions and the methodologies they operate within are invoked or applied largely to emphasise the veracity of the photograph and to imbue its form and content with integrity as an authentic objective document of its subject. It seems almost as if these rules are self-consciously followed in order simply to justify the medium and to divert attention away from its flaws. When looking at a contemporary photograph constructed along such lines the sense of the photograph's making is palpable – its appearance and status *as* a photograph is accentuated. However, the photographer's mechanical over-emphasis of the photographic medium, and of the making of the photograph, often seems employed only to validate photography itself, rather than to reveal any particular profundity in its subject. Photography here creates an artificial sense of distance that serves as a ploy to distract the viewer from any criticism of the medium and its capability to represent a reliable sense of reality.

Such a methodology – as famously applied by Bernd and Hilla Becher within their extensive practice and by a succession of photographers influenced by their work (and its claim of objectivity) – *assumes* materiality, thereby reinforcing the outward (surface) material appearance of the thing photographed – turning (active) matter into (passive) object. The relation of such photography to notions of truth or reality is predicated on the emphatically affirmed object-ness of the thing photographed that the applied methodology achieves. Such affirmation is realised through the settled sense of materiality the photograph projects of the object it depicts. Materiality is here judged through surface – the surface of the matter depicted *as* object and the surface of the photograph itself. Surface thus masks the deeper *materialities* with which the photograph must inevitably be concerned. Although a Becher photograph (Fig. 1) provides one focus of study within this thesis, my critique of this evident trope within documentary photography, as laid out above, is more applicable to the work of some of their disciples. The method, as outlined, also persists as a standard mode of address utilised by many practitioners. It should be immediately noted, of course, that the Bechers produced exclusively black and white representations of their subjects – so

abstracting them to that degree from their relation to reality.[2] Such abstraction does serve to open their photographs, enough to lend them further agency, this study contends.

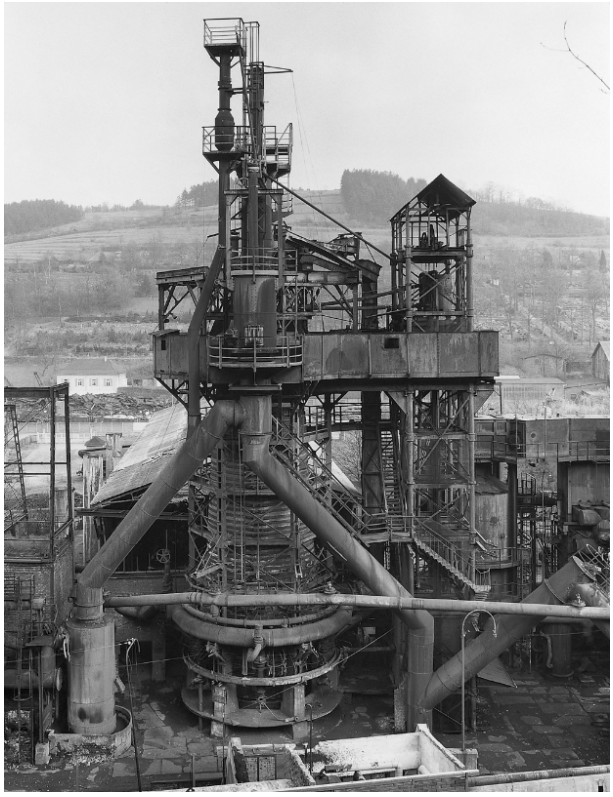

Fig. 1: *Blast Furnace, Hainer Hütte, Siegen, Germany, 1961*, Bernd and Hilla Becher (1961), black and white photograph.

To add further context regarding my research – its motivations and concerns as established above – it is useful to provide here a short overview of my past work. One driver of this study has been my interest in the shared and diverging characteristics and dynamics of the still photograph and the moving image. My previous practice has been based in both these forms of photographic media and has maintained a particular questioning regard for the documentary nature of images. My work with still photography includes the exhibition (Kettle's Yard Gallery, Cambridge, 1996) and allied publication, *Night Watch* (1996). Photographed at night, this body of work

[2] It should also be acknowledged that for some of Bernd Becher's students, such as Thomas Ruff, graduating from the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf (Hilla also had input into this tuition), the questioning of photography's relation to notions of the real has always been a central concern.

sought to relocate the University of Cambridge – placing it back into the threatening flooded landscape of its mediaeval origins, thus challenging its comfortable established status as an elite and powerful seat of learning and purveyor of knowledge. The conceptual and visual intent of this work collided elements of documentary and fiction. My other work with photography has shared similar concerns for place, history, memory, narrative, fiction and document. The three feature-length collaborative film works I have made with filmmaker Anthea Kennedy also form an important and substantial part of my evolving practice. These films, which might be loosely described as experimental documentaries, explore the representation of place and architecture within real or imagined histories. The first of these films, *Stella Polare* (2006) was shot in the melancholy and architecturally confused city of Trieste. The following two films, *The View from Our House* (2013) and *Four Parts of a Folding Screen* (2018), were shot in Berlin and explore small, hidden, histories of the Nazi past, mapping, in the contemporary city, mundane place and its architecture. All three films were premiered at International Film Festival Rotterdam and have been screened internationally at other festivals, and at other public and research-based screening events.

My approach to practice, in both photography and film (cinema), has been informed by my contact, beginning in the mid 1980s, with the experimental filmmaker Stephen Dwoskin, both as a student, at undergraduate level, when he taught at the London College of Printing, and within my employment as art director and second-camera on several of his film productions in the 1990s. Although his subject and method are very different from my own, Dwoskin's concern for subjective ways of seeing, in marked opposition to conceptually led practice, remains an influence on my own practice and thinking.

## New methodologies – from theory to practice:

### A case for New Materialism

The aim of the thesis is not to test *documentary* photography per se (it is too wide a genre in terms of purpose and form for that). However, in the light of Brecht's critique, the mimetic nature of the medium and its theorising will be important to the study. The examples of photography that will be discussed all serve evident documentary functions too, as, arguably, all photographs do. An apparently simple question that will be raised early in this enquiry is: What is a photograph? The answer to this may be found through the application of thought derived from New Materialism. This branch of theory, emerging in the first decade of this century, rethinks our relation to the material world – giving primacy to matter. Ideas and methodologies developed within new materialist thinking will be discussed and applied within the study in terms that make explicit their relevance and usefulness to photographic theory and practice. New materialism's refuting of earlier conceptions of the relation between the human and matter, as formulated in dualistic terms colliding nature and culture, will also inform this enquiry into the nature of photography and shape the development of its original thinking. Other conceptions and perceptions of physical realities, contesting claims made by thinkers within the orbit of new materialism, will also inform this research.

### Material concerns considered in relation to practice

The inability of a photograph to provide revelation of anything, in material or psychological terms, that it does not directly show, as in the problem raised by Brecht, places that unseen matter (accepting that the psychological is rooted in material concerns too) in the range of the ineffable or the elusive – the elusive subject of the thesis title. This study will seek to identify how that which is unseen in a photograph may, once conceptualised and activated through recourse to particular conceptions of matter, resolve to reveal a deeper understanding of an imaged *reality*. Through such an approach, foregrounding matter, the bodily as well as mental process of recognising or defining the real becomes an interdependent one, binding matter – that of the human

and, perhaps more importantly, that of the encountered physical reality – to the mechanics of perception. The significance of movement and time to the conceiving and perceiving of matter will have a bearing on the research, linked to phenomenology, pursued through theory and practice.

Brecht's critique of photography, originating as it does from the period of high modernism and from within a particular political context, will also provide an important historical perspective for this study. The temporal orientation that places Brecht's concerns in relation to historical materialism's (predominantly Marxist) critique of the social, economic and political order of things will facilitate a link to contemporary thought, specifically to new materialism's rethinking of the relation of the human to matter. Conceptions of history and of time, as relevant to photography and its theorising and to the physical subject to which the practice is orientated, will reinforce the focus developed within the thesis on matter and materiality. Specific concerns of matter connect the range of historical and contemporary photographic and other works, those of the Bechers and Robert Smithson foremost among them, that will be examined. The outcomes of this study will be tested through practice employing photographic media.

**Methods and methodology of practice**

The elusive subject the thesis title signals, as a counter to its overtly implied abstraction, the necessity of the explicitly discursive approach I have developed and pursued within this research and applied to the realising of its outcomes. This eclecticism is evident in the content and form of the thesis and its modes of writing and finds its echo, in terms of ethos, in the sense of open and continually searching curiosity that has driven the practice – to which the thesis text, in turn, responds.

I was aware, in bringing into play, as the starting point of my enquiry, Brecht’s criticism of photography (as cited by Benjamin), that I was utilising a much quoted and referenced critique of photography's shortcomings – one that raised the abstract problem: of how to show or reveal something that is not directly visible. This use of a

familiar source located my research and its question very clearly in the orbit of photographic discourse, as further developed over the greater part of a century.

The elusiveness of the title also points to what I discerned to be an impasse, in more contemporary terms, in thinking photography – that finding something new, purposeful or revelatory to say about the medium and its nature seemed impossible or futile. This is not to dismiss the important thinking on the medium that has of course been thought, written and published. In recognition of this field of study, the breadth of its discourse exploring the essential nature of photography – including as specifically encapsulated in a volume of conversations involving a wide range of writers and thinkers on photography (Elkins, 2007) – was reviewed at the outset of this study. This targeted critical reflection features in Chapter One of this thesis and serves to further lay out the ground of the study and its relation of theory to practice.

In trying to find value myself in thinking and making photography, my research has needed to adopt a speculative approach, one that to an extent has ignored or refuted some of the presumed certainties of photography – documentary photography in particular.

The discursive nature of the thesis has identified significant connections between the diverse examples of theory and practice studied and has established a focus on shared concerns for, and of, matter. The linking, within the chapters, of, for example, Eugène Atget's photographs of tree trunks and roots to a description of the roots of a tree in a Jean-Paul Sartre novel, and to anthropologist Tim Ingold's expressed formulation of the matter of a tree as a "tree-in-the-air", has consolidated the emphasis of the thesis and resulting practice on matter, and on conceptions and perceptions of matter. Matter, as an overriding subject and concern, thus underpinned the writing throughout the thesis and was central to the methodologies of practice.

The core of the study, as pursued through practice, led the development of the themes and concerns of each thesis chapter. Each chapter, therefore, responds to ideas explored and resolved through practice, photographing Soane's wall at the Bank of England. In turn, the practice continued to respond to, and physically and materially

work through, developments in thinking resulting from theoretical enquiry. The concluding and introductory sections of each chapter construct a sense of continuity of thought and method, despite the apparent diversity of the thesis content. Chapter Five offers further reflection on the practice and its orientation and achievement considered in context with the aims of the study. This discussion is then resolved further within the Conclusion. The methodology of the study as a whole facilitated a process of ongoing reflection – a series of enactments in which practice informed theoretical enquiry, this research in turn informing practice, and so on. This approach, taking as its lead the inclusivity and openness promoted by methodologies of thought and practice operating within the orbit of new materialism, is one that unifies processes of thinking and making. In this sense, the thesis itself has become (the overall study being, in new materialist terms, reconceptualised in expanded material form) an extension of practice. This, for me, is an important and significant outcome of the study – that the writing equates materially to practice to the extent that the writing is itself practice.

The practice itself, realised in photography and video, is directed towards a single subject: the exterior of a specific architectural structure representative of Brecht's factory. The Bank of England, given its particular historical, architectural, political and social significance, has equal weight, in human as well as architectural terms, to the idea and function of a factory.

As is reflected upon throughout the thesis and within Chapter Five in particular, I pursued and evolved directly at site photographing Soane's wall, a deliberately simple methodology of working practice. My aim in doing so was to position the practice between methodologies conceived and pursued with and without pretentions towards objectivity. I abstained from the use of refined photographic technology and its coupling with rigorously standardised ways of seeing and representing – such as may have laid claim to objectivity. In electing to use a type of camera now largely considered anachronistic, when considered in a professional context, I was aligning my practice with an outmoded way of working. In so choosing to operate in a manner opposed to professional documentary practice, my work became allied, in a contemporary sense, with 'alternative' forms of photography – as employed within

wider art practice – encompassing methodologies less concerned with technical fidelity, and which, through their loose aesthetic and formal visual qualities, variously exude overt subjectivity. In effect, relevant to the content of this thesis and the concerns of its enquiry, I had developed and enacted a methodology pitched between two very specific examples of existing practice – the photographic work of Bernd and Hilla Becher (the subject of Chapter Three) on the one hand and that of Robert Smithson (the subject of Chapter Four) on the other.

Brecht's criticism of photography's fidelity, and of its relation to truth and reality, opened the research to approaches that employ methodologies and tactics, of what might be termed 'anti-photography', that overtly draw attention to the medium's flaws, its material fragility and its untrustworthiness. My use of expired films whose chemical emulsions had become, through changes in their core matter, unreliable and unpredictable, in terms of their ability to render faithful representations of reality, engaged my work with a strategy that in itself expressed scepticism of the medium – particularly regarding its claims to veracity. The process of my practice, as part of my method, made a visual and conceptual virtue of (chemical) photography's flaws. The ruined nature of the films and of the resulting prints, in terms of the accuracy of their representational mimicry, provided, through the course of the practice, a conceptual link to allegorical parallels concerning the fixity or otherwise of matter (principally the matter of the photographic subject, namely Soane's wall at the Bank of England). These broad conceptual concerns regarding matter, that have extended to consideration – in comparative terms – of the material natures of the digital and analogue image, have allowed engagement with the still fairly recent theoretical field of study of new materialism. It is through this combination of practices, concepts and ideas, predicated on theoretical and physical notions and properties of matter, that this study has sought to demonstrate a contribution to knowledge. As the thesis illustrates, the concern of the study has been to define what photography *is*, in material terms, as a process, in a way that avoids binary separations and oppositions of nature and culture. The methodology developed and pursued was predicated on that aim. In broad terms, the conclusion proposed is that any definition of photography is incomplete without acknowledgement of process. As is described in detail in the text of Chapter Five, my essential methodology of photographing changed very little throughout the duration of

the study. This established approach, in part dictated by my previous experience as a photographer and by the imposing physical nature of my subject, allowed me to achieve a level of continuity through the series of photographs, as finally presented. This continuity in turn facilitated a focus of address on matter as both a physical entity and conceptual idea merging nature and culture imbued with agency to affect (as variously proposed by exponents of new materialist thinking, as explored within the thesis). The methodologies of practice extended beyond the use and consideration of still photography to briefly encompass a bodily experiment with video that allowed further enquiry into the action and significance of movement within perception and modes of visual representation.

The significance of ruin, as outlined previously, to the practice facilitated an engagement with abstract ideas, specifically in relation to what the resulting photographs may allude to but cannot directly show – the invisible and abstract functions of the institution enclosed by Soane's wall. Such concern, considered in the context of expanded forms and flows of matter, brings new materialist thinking into play. The physical as well as conceptual approach to photographing at site was pursued with the intent to reveal (or at least suggest) – through the medium's inability to see through walls and to render visible that which is invisible or virtual – the abstract nature of money: its unfathomable and to an extent non-existent physical or material reality.

As established above, the content, form and appearance of the outcomes of the practice have been directed towards situating the Bank, as a structure and as an institution, in relation to concerns of matter. The developed methodologies of practice, as outlined, have been enacted with the intention of making somehow perceptible the unseen, as well as the directly seen, material properties of the Bank. The resulting photographs, both individually and in combination, are intended to facilitate a bringing to mind of abstract and invisible notions of power, wealth and credit – such as are hidden by the institution of the Bank as a physical entity. The foregrounding of matter, accentuated, within enactment of the practice, integrating new materialist and philosophical ideas, foregrounds also the matter of time. The methodology of photographing in time and over time the facade of Soane's wall, registers within the series of photographs, the

fluidity as well as the fixity of time. The practice embeds time, its agency for affect felt within photographically generated depictions of the eroded Jurassic stone that constitutes its subject.

### Additional methodologies of writing practice

Concerns of materiality extend to the text of the thesis itself through the construction of descriptive passages that enact closely observed readings of particular photographic examples relevant to the study. These bodies of text create through their making, and invite through their reading, an enhanced engagement with the material properties of photographs and with what and how those photographs show. The construction of the thesis also includes lengthy quotations that lend emphasis to the material essence of each author's writing (albeit most often as translated from their original published texts).

## Material outcomes of practice

The original works resulting from this study consist of:

A portfolio of photographic works in a variety of formats variously describing surviving nineteenth-century architectural structures designed by Sir John Soane that together comprise the wall that wraps the street-level exterior of the Bank of England building in the City of London. This work as a single, mutable entity is entitled (and referred to in the thesis as) *BANK*.

Work originated in digital video (*City Circular*) that demonstrates and depicts encounter with the surface and form of the same stone structures.

## Introduction to the thesis chapters

As already indicated, the thesis has been constructed to articulate a progression of thinking and of ideas and to also suggest a sense of how the process of this research, as encapsulated within this accumulation of writing, became central to the practice. This overview of the content and structure of the five chapters identifies key aspects of research that link from one chapter to the next – confirming the continuity, purpose and achievement of the study as a whole. Writing, as well as informing, supporting and contextualising the practice, should be considered (including in a material sense) as part of the practice.

Chapter One establishes theoretical grounds for the study, along with methodologies to be employed within the thesis and brought to bear on the practice. Towards these ends, the chapter reviews photographic debate pursued by a number of prominent theorists and critics. For example, recent discussion on the essential nature of photography – as specifically encapsulated in a volume of conversations involving a wide range of writers and thinkers on photography (Elkins, 2007) – is surveyed and an impasse in ways of thinking photography identified. Although not an exhaustive review, one of its conclusions is that discourse is limited by a lack of deep engagement with individual photographs, and so largely remains constituted as abstract ideas. The chapter outlines how thinking variously formulated within the turn in theory recognised as new materialism can be usefully applied to photography – and to its varied relations and oscillations of subjectivity and objectivity. The propositions resulting from this discussion, relevant to conceptions of matter and objective reality, are further tested through engagement with philosophical imaginings of the mechanics of perception and memory. Matter, in abstract as well as physical terms, is therefore established as a key concern of the research, as pursued in theory and through practice. The chapter proposes methodological approaches to thinking and the seeking of understanding – as applicable to photography – that lend emphasise to matter, so making materially tangible, if not physically material, photography's abstractions. A form of *close reading*, foregrounding description over interpretation, is discussed – bringing historical philosophical ideas to bear on more contemporary examples of thought – in this context. This particular methodology, conceptually grounded in

material concerns of being, becomes central to this study. An awareness of time inherent to the idea and process of close reading translates onto the photographic act itself. The temporal encounter of the act of photography considered in itself as close reading – as enacted at the site of the Bank of England, around the circumference of Soane's wall – connects (the passing of) time with matter and locates, as is its futile gesture, matter in time. This chapter therefore establishes the philosophical and speculative ethos of the study, pursued in opposition to claims of certainty, that unites its theory and its practice. In the making of the photographs that comprise *BANK*, the address of the camera, in terms of proximity to its subject and the nature of its tentative scanning of surface and form – as dictated by myself as its operator – was in part determined by the research and thinking, regarding matter, pursued and applied within the formulation of this chapter.

Chapter Two continues discussion of new materialist theory by linking ideas of thing-ness to affect. This brings into play Roland Barthes's (2000) notion of *punctum* as it relates to the *thing* and the thing's potential, through the process and outcome of photography's mimicry, to produce *affect* (as defined within the chapter). A comparison of diverse imagery (literary as well as visual – passages from a novel by Jean-Paul Sartre are integral to this discussion) and thought in some ways significant to Barthes's text brings to the fore concerns of matter, philosophy, psychology and the mechanics of phenomenology and perception. This study of critical, physical, emotional and material concerns relevant to photography is pursued in the light of new materialist thinking that reconsiders the relationship between human concerns and matter. Building on Chapter One's introduction to new materialism, this chapter draws parallels between Barthes's ideas suggesting the active nature of the photograph with recent thinking proposing the vibrancy or agency of matter. The chapter suggests how the distillation of Barthes's ideas (in particular), through the application of new materialist thought, can facilitate a deeper appreciation of the significance of *matter* to photography and photographic representation. An equivalent emphasis on matter and on the mechanics of affect inform the practice – as visibly evident within the body of photographs made in psychological as well as physical encounter with Sir John Soane's wall at the Bank of England. This chapter's appreciation of Sartre's philosophical and phenomenological concerns voiced through the actions of his imaginary character are

also significant to the outcomes of my practice. The conclusions of this chapter and their import regarding the practice establish the grounds for the study of a single photograph pursued in Chapter Three.

Chapter Three contains, as its primary focus, a detailed study of the photograph *Blast Furnace, Hainer Hütte, Siegen, Germany, 1961*, by Bernd and Hilla Becher. Concentration on this single photograph facilitates a concentration on, and, simultaneously, an opening out of, the concerns of the thesis and study, as so far established. The photographers and this particular photograph are specifically chosen, this choice premised on the architectural nature of the photograph's subject matter and the overtly stated methodology employed within its making. My own practice, though markedly different in many respects to that of the Bechers, can be considered through the prism of this chapter's content – which progressively broadens in scope whilst remaining anchored to the study of a single photograph. The work of the Bechers is particularly relevant to this research given its profound influence on contemporary documentary photography and art practice. This early but not untypical example of their extensive oeuvre is studied with a particular regard for how such a photograph can be read and understood in relation to history. The formal and aesthetic qualities of the photograph are considered in terms, as defined within the previous chapters, of agency and affect. The precise subject of the photograph and the history it signals offers further revelation when opened out through methods of interrogation informed by, and responding to, new materialist ideas. These methods are deliberately embroiled, justified by recourse to new materialist thinking, with that which the photograph does not and for the most part *cannot* directly show. The aim of such a strategy, regarding this approach to the Becher's photograph, is to show that other readings of their work, extending beyond formal comparison and typological concerns, are possible. History is pursued here as the 'elusive' subject – which, in Brecht's terms, a photograph may fail to show. This history, as alluded to above, is sought within and beyond the obvious material limits of the photograph. The processes and results of this chapter's seeking of a history, or of history's affect, as palpably significant to what a single photograph can and cannot show, translates directly onto the aims and results of my practice – the photographs that comprise *BANK*. Important here, as the chapter establishes, facilitated by new materialist extended conceptions of matter, is the

acknowledgement of affect, or its *agential* equivalent, residing in, or experienced as emanating from, an individual photograph materially extended beyond the physical and thought limits of what it directly shows.

The Bechers photograph, its unifying subject and the collective ground that subject occupies, connects to concerns present in the work of Robert Smithson, a specific example of which is the focus of the next chapter.

Chapter Four focuses on a single artwork by American artist Robert Smithson: *The Monuments of Passaic* (1967). Despite the specificity of the work's form, as an illustrated journal article, it shares concerns, centred on place and industry, with the Becher photograph studied in the previous chapter. The materiality of the article text itself, as it appears on the page, is important to this chapter's regard for Smithson's work viewed through the lens of new materialism. Although known as a land artist, Smithson used photography extensively within his work to experience and register the physical action of light and time on land, space and place. Individual photographs illustrating the *Passaic* article are studied with the aim of achieving a semblance of Smithson's own sense of encounter, at site, as experienced through the viewfinder of his camera (and as partially reconstructed through his written testimony of his tour within post-industrial landscape in the vicinity of Passaic, New Jersey). The importance of *movement* – as manifest in a variety of dynamic forms operating within Smithson's works – is considered with reference to specific writings of Walter Benjamin on language and history. This discussion is pursued with respect to both image and text, in terms of the action and impact of movement on the interpretation of meaning. A parallel is drawn in this regard between the narrative dynamics of Smithson's article and Benjamin's experimental text *One-Way Street* (Benjamin, 1985, pp.45-104). This enquiry extends the literary concerns of narrative and analogy explored in Chapter Two.

The work and concerns of Robert Smithson, as explored in the text of this chapter, roots the thesis in notions of ruin and entropy that manifest and emphasise fragmentation, time and history. Smithson's work too emphasises the value of speculation, as also embraced within the subjectively led methodology of practice of

this study. Smithson's bodily engagement with his subject, and with the matter of perceiving that subject, invokes phenomenology and the mechanics of perception – as well as language.

Chapter Five reflects critically on my own practice as it has developed within this study. The content connects with the key theoretical ideas, with a particular focus on matter, explored within the thesis that have informed the practical experiment. The chapter begins by introducing the Bank of England as the physical subject of my practice and places aspects of the building's history and structure in context with abstract notions of capital and exchange. The increasing significance, over centuries, of the Bank as a financial institution of state – accumulating wealth, consolidating power and exercising political and social control – is outlined in relation to the expansion of the building as a physical entity. The writing on practice adopts an openly subjective form qualified with reference to variously expressed theoretical positions of new materialism, on matter, agency and affect. This critical reflection on the content and form of the range of works produced is further informed by my studies of the contrasting but still connected works of the Bechers and Smithson. Philosophical and other writings impacting on the nature of my photographic encounters are also integrated into this review of the practice produced – and the importance to it of concerns of matter. The chapter, working towards its conclusion, also assesses the value of description, constructed in both text and image, towards understanding and revelation. The thesis thus draws links between artists, art forms, literary forms and methodologies of thought and practice. That these links are often surprising or confound expectation, of method and intention, including with regard to visual representation, enables the discussion of the thesis, and its dialogue with practice, to offer new knowledge – at times almost serendipitously – through the collision of its content and its ideas. The contribution to knowledge to which this project lays claim is discussed and contextualised further within the final Conclusion.

The Appendix contains, as an extension to the practice, examples of text resulting from descriptive engagements – as pursued within strategies discussed in the thesis – with specific examples of photographs addressed in, or resulting from, this study.

## Chapter One

### New Materialism considered in terms of its value to the theorising of photography and its relevance to photographic practice

This chapter places my research in a contemporary context, orienting it first in relation to recent influential examples of photography theory and then, more significantly, in relation to theory developed over the last decade under the banner of new materialism. This discussion identifies an impasse in photographic debate that prevents theory from moving forward to any decisive degree. New materialism is introduced in terms of how this turn in theory foregrounding ideas of matter can be applied productively to thinking about the nature of photography. In particular, the chapter identifies how a realignment of theory, shifting priority to matter from direct human concerns, offers potential for revelation (providing new insights into the practice of photography). Reference made to a range of positions on thinking and experiencing matter serves to objectively counter and question the advocacy of new materialism's academically formulated and expounded ideas.

A form of close reading, in part founded on new materialist thinking and methodologies, and manifest as descriptive writing, is introduced. This particular method of study is justified in the contexts of its application within the 'writing up' of the thesis, as well as within the resulting practice. In broader terms, the usefulness to photography theory of the alternative to critique offered by description is also asserted. The enquiry of the chapter signals, regarding the thinking and methodologies it outlines, the importance of matter – and of how that matter is conceptualised and encountered – to the development and resolution of my cumulative practice, *BANK*, pursued with photography and video. The discussion responds to concerns brought to the fore within my various forays with photography at the Bank that collide conceptualisations of photography, perception and matter. This collision of thought, as further progressed through the study, moves towards rethinking, through the juxtaposing and combining of thinking and making, what photography is.

**Photography theory**

A critical debate centred on the theorising of photography takes place in James Elkins's edited volume, *Photography Theory* (2007). Despite its vintage, the density of critique generated by this book provides a productive point of departure for this study. This innovative (if inconclusive) text constitutes an academic forum (comprised of *essays*, *seminar*, *assessments* and *afterwords*) discussing and testing a range of dominant theories regarding the nature of photography and photographic representation. Thirty-one academics contributed to the discourse, proposing and critiquing various theoretical ideas and positions. Their collective aim, as the book's introductory chapter suggests, was to advance photographic theory, facilitating a critical response to evolving contemporary social and political contexts of photography, addressing such questions as: "How do the material and physical processes of different photographic practices contribute to the meaning of the image represented?" (Elkins, 2007, pp.42-43).

This compartmentalised debate is interesting more for the layered form of discourse it succeeds in creating than it is for the revelation it provides – as its contributors largely attest. The collection of essays and the central seminar that forms the basis of the book's discussion rehearses familiar lines of enquiry centred around notions of indexicality, ontology, modernism and postmodernism, nature, semiology, time, *punctum*, the material essence of a photograph, and so on. Thus, the discussion was directed towards long established theories and ideas, essentially those laid out in the book's introduction – inserted into the text of which is the same "now often quoted remark" of Brecht that begins my own study (Kriebel, in Elkins, 2007, p.11). In general, the twenty-seven contributing assessors seem to collectively conclude that, although the forum has not been without value, little light has been cast – by either the individual or group discussions pursued – on how to progress the theorising of photography.

Significantly, Sabine T. Kriebel opens the book's introductory chapter, placing the development of photographic theory in an historical context, by posing the "apparently simple" questions: "What is a photograph? What is Photography?" (Ibid., p.3). Kriebel

then roots, through the following formulation of words, these questions in concerns that are directly material: "what *is* the medium [?]" (Ibid.). This search for answers regarding the materiality of the medium, she suggests, is "a necessary basis for its theorization" (Ibid.). Kriebel raises the problematising nature of the digital medium also in terms of matter and immateriality – citing its contested "ability to produce imagery that has no immediate relation to the material world" (Ibid., p.39).[3] Kriebel's foregrounding of photography's varied materialities would seem to point to the value of (re)thinking the medium materially (despite the ensemble text of *Photography Theory* failing to achieve this in explicit terms). Such emphasis would construct a bridge between photographic theory and theoretical enquiry pursued as new materialism.

**Punctum and materiality – for example**

The element of theory critiqued in Elkins's coordinated discussion that becomes most relevant to my own research is Roland Barthes's influential but derided notion of *punctum*.[4] Barthes's application of the term is introduced in *Photography Theory*, albeit in a negative critical context, by Elkins himself, within the seminar discussion. He cites it as a "model" for critiquing photography that should be dismissed as "inadequate" due to its very private nature, as in: "I perceive something here that you will necessarily see very differently" (Elkins, 2007, p.157). Whilst acknowledging the vagaries of the idea, my interest in punctum lies precisely in the mechanics that define it as a personal phenomenon – in which a tiny detail comes *from* the photograph (or "shoots out of it like an arrow and pierces me") to "wound" or "prick" the viewer (Barthes, 1993, p.26). Within Barthes's conception, the viewer does not *project* punctum *onto* the photograph, instead this imaginary force travels *to* the viewer. This suggests that punctum, and its latent potential to act on the viewer, resides *in* the photograph – and so, in a sense, is integral to the photograph's material properties – or, potentially, to the material properties of the thing photographed. Of course,

[3] Kriebel here largely contrasts the thinking of William J. Mitchell and Lev Manovich, the position of the latter claiming significant material comparison between analogue and digital photography.
[4] As discussed by Barthes in *Camera Lucida* (2000), originally published in French as *La Chambre Claire* (1980).

punctum, posited in philosophical terms, is not a phenomenon that can be scientifically proven. Barthes introduces it in a first-person style, echoing, as Batchen identifies, forms of fiction writing of interest to the author, such as the detective novel (Batchen, 2009, p.12). Thus, Barthes's text is "posing neither as fiction or non-fiction" (Ibid.). However explicitly meant by Barthes, there is still value in considering punctum and its orientation, relevant to photography and more broadly, within concerns of matter and the animation of matter. This discussion is pursued further in Chapter Two which considers punctum and *affect* (the subject of Barthes's quest in *Camera Lucida* (2000)) through the lens of theory derived from new materialism – such as Bennett's attribution of vibrancy to matter (Bennett, 2009). This realignment of dynamics operating between subject and object and activated within the process of perception, recognises that punctum (if such a force might be so described) is contingent on an individual viewer's or perceiver's cultural experience or emotional disposition. The two-way process at work, consciously or unconsciously, within the psychology of perception is expressed here by the philosopher Henri Bergson:

> The diverse perceptions of the same object, given by my different senses, will not, [...], when put together, reconstruct the *complete* image of the object; they will remain separated from each other by intervals which measure, so to speak, the gaps in my needs. (It is to fill these intervals that an education of the senses is necessary.) (Bergson, 2004, pp.46-47)

In these terms, punctum is the affect, sparked within perception, that educates the senses.

**The thing itself**

The phrase "the thing itself", originating from philosophy, is often invoked by writers on photography to foreground the thingness of the thing photographed in comparison with (or as distinct from) the thingness of the photograph and the qualities of its photographic rendering of the thing photographed. The definitive physical sense of a thing created through the conjunction of these words implicates properties of matter. Thinking on the material status of a thing and on its human perceiving has been developed by succeeding generations of philosophers – stretching back millennia.

Working backwards, the historical materialisms of, for example, Benjamin and Brecht are acknowledged responses to the dialectical materialism of Marx, whose overarching material concerns were at least in part informed by notions of materialism articulated more idealistically by Hegel, whose own philosophical turn was in part a response to Kant's *The Critique of Judgemen*t (*Kritik der Urteilskraft*, 1790) – and so on.

The origins of the "desire to see in the photographic image "the thing itself" without intervention, mediation, or artifice", reside in (and pre-date) the very beginnings of photography (Emerling, 2012, p.18). Geoffrey Batchen, in *Burning with Desire: The Conception of Photography* (1999), rethinks (including with recourse to Kant) the identity and nature of photography by reflecting again on the mental as well as physical processes that brought it into being. The revision pursued by Batchen was driven by his dissatisfaction with "what at first glance seem to be two diametrically opposed points of view" – those of formalism and postmodernism, the development of which, between them, cover the last hundred years of the history of the medium (Batchen, 1999, p.20). He outlines the differences of these two positions in oppositional terms, to simplify: singular identity (formalist) versus identity dependent on culture (postmodern), thus – essence versus culture; history versus no history; eternal values versus mutability and contingency; art and aesthetics versus social practice and politics (Ibid.). Batchen then asks:

> Why, amid the general postmodern critique of binary structures, does this division between sameness and difference, nature and culture, substance and appearance, continue to be essentialized? Why, in short, assume that nature is frozen in place as the undifferentiated origin against which culture can secure its identity? (Ibid., p.21)

Batchen rejects both formalist and postmodern approaches to the theorizing of photography precisely because of the forced binary opposition, primarily between nature and culture, that they rely on, in which "each depends on defining itself as not-the-other, allowing neither to actually engage the logic of otherness itself" (Ibid.). His conclusion here is that: "postmodernism and formalism, at least in their dominant photographic manifestations, both avoid coming to grips with the historical and ontological complexity of the very thing they claim to analyse" (Ibid.). It would seem

that meaningful discussion of photography is closed down by such dualistic thinking. Reflecting on this dilemma, Batchen then poses the following questions:

> Should the identity of photography be confined to the realm of nature or to that of culture? Or will we find that, wherever we look – at photographic theory or at the medium's history – any given foundation is continually being displaced by a dynamic and troubling play of differences? (Ibid.)

Batchen's intention is to "look for the identity of photography in the history of its origins" (thus avoiding the binary oppositions of formalism and postmodernism). This quest he pursues with the aim of addressing "questions of history and identity in general and perhaps even ... the question of *matter itself*" (my italics) (Ibid.). His abandonment of contemporary theory and return to and beyond the pure nascent state of the medium, immerses Batchen in a range of materialities essential to photography's conception and invention. Batchen's temporally and materially deeper consideration of his subject (whilst never quite upsetting the nature/culture binary altogether) places his approach in an approximate alignment, at least, with new materialist methodologies. This apparent convergence in itself signals the potential value of new materialism to the study of photography.

Although there are a range of critical positions held within the orbit of new materialist thought, a useful general definition of its overarching theoretical stance is offered here by Manuel DeLanda: "Any materialist philosophy must take as its point of departure the existence of a material world that is independent of our minds" (Dolphijn and van der Tuin, 2012, p.39). These words having seemingly dislocated the mind from the material world, Delanda then asks; "if the mind is not what gives identity to mountains and rivers, plants and animals, then what does? (Ibid.). In seeking answers to such a question, new materialism reappraises the relationship of the mind to the thing itself and how that thing is defined and understood in relation to human concerns. New materialist methodologies of thought are thus predicated on giving priority to matter. Rather than being the subject of the human mind, the thing itself, through the recognition of its complex materiality, is acknowledged as having agency.[5] Coole and

[5] As variously defined and interpreted by a range of academics, as introduced and discussed in this thesis – centred on the core idea of the potential for influence of one thing on another. It is defined by Karen Barad, a leading figure within new materialist thinking as referring to the relationality of the

Frost introduce new materialism by signalling its concern for "the myriad ways in which matter is both self-constituting and invested with – and reconfigured by – intersubjective interventions that have their own quotient of materiality" (Coole and Frost, 2010, p.7). This broadly shared conception confirms that the thing itself should be considered as *active* independent of the mind, rather than *passive* and subjected to the human mind. This approach is largely at variance with earlier conceptions of materialism predicated directly on human concerns – such as that of human labour at the core of Marx's application of dialectical materialism. In common with Batchen, most new materialist thinkers also reject the dualistic or binary approaches integral to modern and particularly postmodern thought and critique – principally because such oppositions are the reductive constructs of the human mind. The notion of critique itself is rejected too on a similar basis – as it is, as Karen Barad puts it, a "practice of negativity ... about subtraction, distancing and othering" (Dolphijn and van der Tuin, 2012, p.49). Instead, Barad proposes "the practice of diffraction, of reading diffractively for patterns of differences that make a difference" (Ibid.). Barad views matter as an *entanglement*, so contesting, for its limit to understanding, distinctions of externality (the boundaries of what is a thing) formed within reductive thought pitting nature against culture (Ibid.). The ethos of this new materialist approach, in terms of its conception of matter and its opposition to dualistic and hierarchical critique, has informed methodologies, founded on reading and describing, employed within this study. My photographs, under the collective title of *BANK*, acknowledge, in their form, content and the mental and physical manner of their making, the primacy of matter. This philosophy and method of making aligns my practice with new materialist ideas. The matter of this work is discussed further in Chapter Five. Fundamental to this matter is the subject of the photographic encounter – the material architectural mass and form of the Bank of England – and the psychological, spatial and temporal nature of the act of photographing. This act of photographing was performed and realised, in conceptual and perceptual terms, in time – within a slowness of time, as demanded by the over-bearing expanse and psychological weight of Soane's wall experienced at close quarters. The slowness of this material confrontation with matter imposed and

properties of materials of things to other matter and things – the potential of such properties through relationality to influence and change states or ontologies of matter: *"Crucially, agency is a matter of intra-acting; it is an enactment, not something that someone or something has. Agency is doing/being in its intra-activity"* (Barad, 2007, p.235). See the Glossary (pp.177-190) for further definitions of terms.

dictated an (imprecise) methodology of visual scrutiny, within which I surveyed form and surface, inching my way, within disoriented spatial orientation, around the circumference of the Bank. The act of photography, pursued in these psychological and material terms, becomes something akin to an entanglement (assuming the material physicality of Barad's notion), entangling myself as photographer with the matter of my subject. The process of encounter thus also becomes an attempt (again referencing Barad) to read diffractively – seeking out differences that make a difference. The duration of encounter the expanse of stone and the business of looking through the primitive machine of the camera demands, extends and slows the reading, so that it becomes as much a bodily experience than it is an intellectual one. The physical and chemical writing of photography describes fragment points of matter that have held my gaze long enough to be so described. Recognition of description as an action within the photographic encounter signals also the value of description and of the slowness of reading, applied to the reading of photographs.

**Close reading**

A process of what might be termed *Close reading* is applied to photographs, within the writing of this thesis, in a methodology derived from new materialist thinking, in this context loosely equating with Barad's advocated practice of *diffraction*. The close reading of photographs, activating new materialist theory, further demonstrates, through the emphasis on matter it achieves, the value of this methodology applied to the act and performance of photographing – as alluded to above and as further discussed in Chapter Five. In the conceptual spirit of Barad's intentions, I have aimed to pursue close reading "not as an additive notion opposed to subtraction ... " but, " ... in the sense of it being suggestive, creative and visionary" (Ibid., p.50). I include this quotation here to illustrate the pitching of this methodology between poles of objectivity and subjectivity. Such an approach may aspire to objectivity but does so through its recognition and acceptance of the value subjectivity and subjective experience to understanding and to knowledge. In combination with Barad's notion of entanglement, such an approach navigates and mitigates (if only through recognition of the possibility) the potential pitfalls of dualistic prejudice, such as may result from

my projection – as automatically activated within encounter – of the culture I have assumed, onto the nature of my subject.

I recognise that close reading, as a term, refers to an established form of study, interpretation and critique practiced within literary and media studies. It was developed in French education and academia as *explication de texte* and in America as *Practical Criticism*. Rather than closely studying various aspects of style and structure towards the interpretation and understanding of plot, or of an author's intention regarding meaning, the close reading I have employed within the thesis and enacted and applied to my practice, aims simply to describe – and through description to recognise the value of so describing. Description garnered through close study acts, in a Benjaminian or Brechtian sense, towards the distancing or delaying of interpretation. Through the act of describing, and the time it takes to describe, the viewer, or reader, is activated and brought closer to the visual content of the image. Description is, then, intended to open the work described and to recognise its potential of agency, including in terms of affect or punctum as discussed, in relation to the thinking of Barthes, in Chapters Two[6] and the photographs of the Bechers in Chapter Three. As indicated above, this approach is informed by new materialist approaches to study that oppose dualistic and hierarchical critique – and which recognise matter in the widest of terms. Description is a means by which to recognise the complexity of matter and its flows, realising and resolving the thing described as an entanglement – of the properties of matter. Description, simply describing what is seen, is a logical and dispassionate method through which appreciation and understanding of visual imagery can be gained.

Through the slow engagement of close reading, the act and process of looking, enacted across a span of time, has become, within this study and its outcomes, enmeshed with the materiality of the image and the content and nature of the photograph (including, by pragmatic necessity, the nature of the photograph in its reproduced form). Looking itself, through encounter, has thus become material, and seeing a process within which

[6] Roland Barthes, within his own deep interest in language, explored, for example, in *The Pleasure of the Text* (1975) (*Le Plaisir du Texte*, 1973), was loosely aligned with the French tradition of *explication de texte*.

many forms of matter (human and non-human) were implicated, triggered and became significant. Though shifted significantly from Barad's own fields of study, the idea of reading diffractively, as interpreted here as close reading, has been applied within this study with the speculative intention of revealing, within the entanglements of matter that constitute a thing and a photograph, differences that make a difference towards understanding. As a response to the unsatisfactory outcome of *Photography Theory*'s discourse, such an approach offers value to thinking photography. Although very much predicated on looking, close *reading* acknowledges cognition as requisite to the activity of description, thus implicating and acknowledging also, the role of interpretation, to the degree to which it is active within perception, within this process. The accentuated sense of process inherent to the action of close reading lends emphasis also to the materiality of language. This idea is pursued further within the study of the work of Robert Smithson detailed in Chapter Four. Description, as is significant to seeing and perception in combination with the inherent descriptive nature of the photographic medium, is also mindfully considered within the encounters of practice practised throughout the study. This imprint of description, including as diffractively achieved through the close reading of surface, is manifest within the outcomes of practice – the photographs that comprise *BANK* – as further reflected upon within the content of Chapter Five. Descriptions of photographic images, examples drawn from Smithson's oeuvre as well as from *BANK*, thus point to the descriptive qualities of the photographs themselves (and of the nature of photography itself as a representational medium) and of the methodologies that shaped their visual and material form. By implication, this claim for the virtues of description simultaneously signals a suspicion of, and sceptical approach to, interpretation.

The temporal and spatial dynamics that are in operation in, or brought to the fore within, the process of seeing and reading closely – as employed within this study, the practice included – suggest another, more appropriate, formulation of its identifying term. *Deep looking* is perhaps a better fit that disentangles the process from the interpretation reliant skill of reading. Matter, of things and photographs, can be considered in terms of depth and in turn the idea of depth suggests time – the time of a photograph, the deep time of history and the deeper time of geology and the universe, as travelled in the work of Smithson perhaps most overtly, but also in the work of the

Bechers and even myself. Looking concentrates perception deeply in space and through time on the thing encountered and seen. The industrial things and sites that the Bechers photographed were fed and in turn processed ancient matter in time, converting or breaking matter down into different material forms. Deep looking acknowledges the complexity of looking in such temporal, spatial and material terms. This philosophy of looking is enacted mindfully within the practice of this study in twenty-first century spatial confrontation with the deep time of the stone of Soane's architecture. For the purposes of this study, the idea of deep looking is subsumed with the more familiar, though appropriated, term of close reading. This association allows further contextualisation within references to other examples.

A need for closer looking was voiced by Michel Frizot within his appraisal of Elkins's *Photography Theory* in which he identifies the lack of engagement in the 'seminar' discussion with photographic examples, with the result that:

> ... photography is referred to in a very abstract way, using euphemisms or metaphors, whereas each and every photograph brings up particular questions, sometimes bothersome questions, and is a sort of reservoir of questions that we should ask ourselves. (Frizot, in Elkins, 2010, p.274)

Frizot then proposes an approach to theory emphasising the medium's technical specificities and characteristics. Although foregrounding material concerns, offered as a key to the understanding of photography, Frizot's own albeit short account also remains for the most part abstract without reference to specific photographs. The close reading of photographs, as a defined critical strategy, was proposed by Shephard Steiner in his contributed critique of *Photography Theory*'s achievement. Within criticism, theoretical concepts (such as aura, *punctum*, index or sign), are, according to Steiner, "abstracted from the experience of looking at a particular photograph and applied across the board" (Steiner, in Elkins, 2007, p.358). Thus, he contends, such concepts are inevitably uncertain (demonstrating the same uncertainty that posed a problem for both Emerling and Batchen). Close reading, for Steiner, offers a method with which to "stabilize the many uncertainties that we currently encounter as photography and photographic criticism" (Ibid.). He further articulates the value of close reading in the following terms – which, it should be recognised, are to some

extent at odds with the methodologies of new materialism (dialectical and dualistic modes of criticism and the practice of critique itself are refuted by many new materialist thinkers, such as Barad, as identified earlier in this chapter):

> ... face-to-face encounter is the point at which critical work begins. Given that understanding is only complete when understood as an act with its own history, this work will of necessity be dialectical. (Ibid.)

The physical and temporal aspects of extended looking referenced in Steiner's account of his own method are important too to the concerns of this thesis and to the form of close reading it employs. The relation of history (time and perception) to understanding is also a significant factor within this work. The dialectical nature of close reading, as advocated by Steiner, suggests the comparison of readings from different viewpoints, or readings that are considered in relation to a range of criteria or theoretical positions. Whilst a dialectical approach offers a promise of objectivity (or revelation, in a Benjaminian sense), the form of close reading I have identified as being of most relevance to my research is concerned more with extended description, over and above interpretation. Such an emphasis avoids the, in Barad's terms, "negative" results of critique and judgement. In the thesis chapters, I encounter the work of Bernd and Hilla Becher and Robert Smithson on these overtly descriptive terms. This approach allows me to avoid the dualistic approach to (photography) theory critiqued by Batchen and Emerling that a dialectical engagement would, to some extent, necessitate. So, rather than following Steiner's approach to close reading, I have looked to alternative forms of writing (outside of critique) to inform my study. These texts do not demonstrate a common mode or style. However, all, as in the example that follows, have value in terms of their foregrounding, through written description, of observed everyday materialities. Thus emphasized, these local material manifestations serve to illuminate larger unseen or abstract realities.

**Georges Perec's descriptive listing of matter**

In creating the slim volume, *An Attempt at Exhausting a Place in Paris*,[7] Georges Perec's stated intention was not to interpret the notable aspects of his chosen location, as surveilled from his café window seat, but instead to describe; "... that which is not noticed, that which has no importance: what happens when nothing happens other than the weather, people, cars, and clouds" (Perec, 2010, p.3). Perec's subject then becomes the humdrum and the everyday. A sense of the unexceptional or ordinary, imbued in place and object, is similarly encountered at site by the Bechers and also by Smithson (as explored in Chapters Three and Four), this banality manifesting very differently in their respective works, the ones, at least, that are the subject of this study.

Perec enacted the close reading of his chosen place in Paris over the span of a weekend. Its written and printed form therefore re-presents the distinctly temporal process of the describing of place, the Place Saint-Sulpice, in chunks of real time. In pragmatic reality, the writing takes the form of a descriptive list, briefly detailing things seen over the course of a morning, afternoon or evening. The following text is from "Day One" of his study:

> ... an inventory of strictly visible things:
> ...
> – Ground: packed gravel and sand.
> – Stone: the curbs, a fountain, a church, buildings...
> – Asphalt
> – Trees (leafy, many yellowing)
> – A rather big chunk of sky (maybe one-sixth of my field of vision)
> – A cloud of pigeons that suddenly swoops down on the central plaza, between the church and then fountain
> – Vehicles (their inventory remains to be made)
> ... (Ibid., p.6)

[7] Originally published in French as *Tentative d'épuisement d'un lieu parisien* (1975). This text formed part of Perec's intent to write neutral descriptions of twelve places around Paris to which he had some personal association or attachment. See Phillips, R. (2018).

The aim of Perec's project, as its title implies, was to exhaust a place of its interest, or of its describable content, through the pedantic listing of the things seen there. This is of course an impossible task – and ultimately Perec's reading, or looking, is cursory in terms of content and detail – but the outcome does succeed in proving the value, over and above interpretation, of descriptive recording. An outcome that articulates, if considered in the light of new materialism, entanglements of matter. Perec's written approach, though sparse in relation to the lengthy duration of his study, as enacted from his café vantage point, can be defined as a form of close reading – enacted in real three-dimensional space over time. Although the sense of encounter and experience would of course be radically different, a similar list of observations could result from a reading of a depicted reality, as held within the two-dimensional confines of a photograph. As implied earlier in this chapter, descriptive observation applied to photographs has informed and echoed, at various turns, conceptual and visual methodologies formulated and enacted within my practice photographing Soane's wall at the Bank of England. The relation of real three-dimensional realities to miniaturised photographic representations, in terms of the value of close reading applied to them, is interesting to consider. The Bechers' slow photographic method in the field, simply through the duration and depth of looking required, is in itself an enactment of close reading. The density of detail afforded by the prints the Bechers' generated through their large-format photographic medium of choice invites another layer of close study. Smithson, in a narrated account of his travels around New Jersey (the subject of Chapter Four), constructs a close reading of at least some aspects of the tour – with the banality of the everyday he observes from a bus described in similar style to that employed by Perec.

*What Photography Is* (2011), the title of Elkins's follow-up volume to *Photography Theory*, is an abstract statement in search of defining knowledge. Disappointed with the inability of contributors to the earlier debate to cast definitive light onto the question of "what photography is", Elkins embarks, in search of an answer, on a solo tour of selected examples of the medium.[8] He perversely, given his disdain of Barthes's enquiry into photography, mirrors, in overtly stated though deliberately distorted form,

[8] Elkins judged, in terms of its achievement, *What Photography Is* to have merely recorded "an unaccountable insouciance about photography's realism." (Elkins, 2011, p.48)

methodologies exercised in the pages of *Camera Lucida* (2000). Elkins writes against Barthes's book by writing "into and through" its text. (Elkin's, 2011, p.xi) His essential concern is the realism not sufficiently resolved in *Photography Theory* – a resolution he now seeks through emphases given to materialities of photography and of specific photographs. This brings Elkins's mode of enquiry in approximate, if not exact, alignment with new materialist thinking. Elkins attempts to locate the real in the "simple material" of photographs and "their surfaces" – though "not reducing photographs to paper, glass, and chemicals" (Ibid., p.38). "Surfaces are not photographs", Elkins contends, suggesting that such a material-oriented approach fails to illuminate what a photograph is (Ibid.). However, his assertion that "once surfaces are forgotten, photographs are also forgotten" would seem to hand primacy back to matter (Ibid.). The photographs Elkins studies, despite the banal form of their mechanical (monochrome) reproductions in the book, do demonstrate extreme elemental and bodily matter – showing, for example, rock salt, the moon's surface, nuclear explosions and a ritually tortuous execution. These photographs (some known and some wilfully obscure), the materialities they show and how they show them, are addressed by Elkins within a critical strategy that he defines as "close looking". Although description is certainly significant to Elkins's method, it is limited in its extent and prejudiced by his pre-existing attitude towards the medium – and is clearly affected too by the very particular content of the examples he has elected to describe. At the conclusion of his quest Elkins remains, despite the density and detail of his enquiry, disappointed with the medium:

> There is a low-level unhappiness in knowing that the grainy surface of the world is what is given in photography, and that it is – with some exceptions, and in a historically determined opposition to painting – not very interesting. (Ibid., p.219)

Thus, Elkins dismisses the wide field of photographic imagery as "mainly barren ground" (Ibid.). Elkins embeds his description within his judgemental writing, denying the reader the mental space required to engage with text purely *as description*. The limited extent of description limits too, the time demanded of the reader to read text free of personal reflection (as pursued by Elkins "through" Barthes) and opinionated critique. The experience of immersion in description, such as would open the image

described to the viewer and facilitate a deeper level of cognition of material concerns, is therefore not triggered.

Description, applied to the two-dimensional photograph, or to the three-dimensional thing photographed, can, simply through its detail, furnish knowledge, realising some sort of truth about the thing or its representation. Bertrand Russell (1911, pp.109-128) considered, linking philosophy to logic, knowledge to be acquired through *acquaintance* and *description*. Description, for Russell, provides definitive knowledge about the acquainted object that presents itself to the subject – the person acquainted with the object. Translated onto experience of a building (the Bank of England, say), or the study of a photograph (of a blast furnace, say), acquaintance is that initial encounter, lacking specific understanding, within which any knowledge gained remains as concepts and so is abstract. By contrast, knowledge by description, in Russell's terms, is "definite" (about "*the* so-and-so", rather than "*a* so-and-so") and, although still largely based on concepts, is therefore tangible (Ibid., p.112). Although not directly translatable to my interpretation and application of description within this thesis, Russell's discussion of the relation between knowledge by acquaintance and knowledge by description serves to demonstrate complexities involved in achieving understanding. The dynamics Russell outlines are pertinent also to those occurring within seeing operating within the act of taking (or making) a photograph, shuttling understanding between subject and object within processes of perception. I am aware of such dynamics, integral to perception, in operation within the mental and physical imagining and realisation of the practice of this study, as resolved in the body of photographs that comprise *BANK*. Philosophical positions on perception, including as informed by new materialist thinking – itself responding to phenomenological concerns – have informed the realisation of my practice, contributing to its exploration of what photography, in a material sense, is. Perception, and the basis of this process in the flows of matter, is further discussed in the chapter that follows.

Susan Sontag agreed with Brecht that "the camera's rendering of reality must always hide more than it discloses" (Sontag, 1979, p.23). For her, photography's promise of understanding achieved through its apparent verisimilitude goes against knowledge as it refutes the viewer's ability to "say no" (Ibid.). The time-based nature of description

can fulfil Sontag's dictum: "Only that which narrates can make us understand" (Ibid.). Written description can narrate a photograph, even those whose visual content seems closed or devoid of narrative potential. Building on acquaintance, description of a photograph, can effect a conceptual (and perhaps epistemological) shift, with respect to what the photographs shows, from, invoking Russell, "*a* so-and-so" to "*the* so-and-so". Written description in this context and on these terms describes what is seen – or, in extended form, what can be known about what is seen. This approach, acknowledging entanglements (to use Barad's term) of matter stretching beyond the limits of what a photograph shows, comes into play within my reading, transcribed in Chapter Three, of a single photograph by Bernd and Hilla Becher. Description deployed to the object at the centre of a Becher photograph allows acquaintance and further attendant description (borrowing Russell's dual terminology) to gravitate towards the edges and beyond the limits of the image frame.

The expanded conception of matter signalled by the notion of entanglement can be considered through the filter of anthropologist Tim Ingold's conception of the properties of material. Critical of less inclusive definitions, Ingold is insistent that invisible, or less directly physical elements, such as air, should be recognised, in terms of their essential nature, as material properties. "The forms of things, far from having been imposed from without upon an inert substrate, arise and are borne along – as we are too", Ingold contends, within a "current of materials" (Ingold, 2007, p.7).[9] Air, along with the light and heat that move through it, is integral to this force. Applied, if only metaphorically or analogously, to photography, this conception serves to expand and make porous the apparently definitive content of a photograph. Air, in this transcribing of Ingold's thinking, becomes the unknown or unseen context, stretching to edge of frame and beyond, within which the centralised *subject*, *object* or *thing*, of a photograph resides. Such extraneous context, described with respect to the properties of materials – those pertaining both to the photograph and to what the photograph depicts – informs and deepens understanding and contributes to knowledge. The process of describing involves the describer *as*, as well as *in*, matter. A photograph can

[9] Ingold's concern for matter and the properties of materials has been pursued in the context of research within Social Anthropology.

then be looked at in terms analogous to Ingold's implication of the human within the flux of matter, as expressed here:

> Like all other creatures, human beings do not exist on the ‘other side’ of materiality but swim in an ocean of materials. Once we acknowledge our immersion, what this ocean reveals to us is not the bland homogeneity of different shades of matter but a flux in which materials of the most diverse kinds – through processes of admixture and distillation, of coagulation and dispersal, and of evaporation and precipitation – undergo continual generation and transformation. (Ibid., p.7)

As applied within this thesis, description, and the time it takes to describe, acknowledges the flows of matter – redefining the photograph and its frozen content as a "current of materials", as referenced above (Ibid.). Description thus animates – breathes life into – the inert photograph and the properties of material processing in, or through, all it depicts. This mode of description is applied in place of theory and theorising, in line with Ingold's damning of academic language in the fields of social and cultural theory (damned for its "grotesque impenetrability" on "unfathomable qualities" of "agency, intentionality, functionality, sociality, spatiality, semiosis, spirituality and embodiment" (Ibid., p.2)). Ingold's criticism attacks much of the theorising of the founding thinkers, such as cited earlier in this chapter, of new materialism. Within the thesis and within aligned practice, methods of description are enacted against abstraction – but in ways that open text or photograph to wider or deeper readings. Through the process of description, as pursued through material encounter with entangled material properties of matter – actual, photographed and materially reproduced –, language and the act of describing are made material.

To describe the properties of materials in Ingold's terms, "is to tell the stories of what happens to them as they flow, mix and mutate" (Ibid., p.14). In the photographs of the Bechers and Smithson, matter can be tracked, in ways significant to the structures and terra firma their photographs show (and how they show it), back in geological time – beyond the Anthropocene. Amongst the matter in question here is coal, iron, water, rock and sand: base matter of the Earth itself or products of geological sedimentation, fossilisation and entropic erosion. The Bechers' and Smithson's shared experience in the coal dust and slag of the Ruhrgebiet illustrates how (from the perspective of new

materialism) the agency of matter is held, either etched as evidential trace or still provocatively active, in their respective works.[10] In Ingold's terms this is not agency but is instead the ever-persisting flows that define and redefine the properties of material things.

**DeLanda, matter, time and the real**

In proposing a new materialist approach to political theory, Manuel DeLanda identifies a flaw in the anthropocentric nature of Marx's thinking that regarded, as he contends; "only human labour [as] a source of value, not steam engines, coal, industrial organization, et cetera" (Dolphijn and van der Tuin, 2012, p.41). DeLanda's assertion that "we need to move beyond that" suggests a need to push thought back to consider ever deeper layers of matter and materiality (in this case, from human labour to deeper layers of matter concerning the material worked by human labour) and how such concerns of matter, so identified and linked, can be seen to impact on or define present ontologies of reality, experience and identity. The human value, or conditions, of labour prioritised by Marx (as critiqued by DeLanda) is, ironically, the missing element that Brecht identifies within his critique of photography. Despite its conceptual limitation, if interpreted in terms of new materialism, Brecht's statement does at least identify the need to dig beneath the surface – in this case of what a photograph shows – in order to see, through the material walls of the factory, the materiality of the labour within.

**Matter beyond the Anthropocene**

The placing of the human at the centre of theory is criticised within new materialist theorising around ecological concerns. The anthropocentric nature of criticism generally (within both modernist and postmodern contexts) has reached its logical conclusion within ecological debate with the adoption of Anthropocene to rename the

[10] The visit together of Bernd Becher and Smithson to the industrial landscape around Oberhausen is documented in the book *Bernd and Hilla Becher and Robert Smithson: Field Trips* (Lingwood, 2002).

current geological epoch. Anthropocene fits, contestably, with a measurement of time dating from the point at which humanity, through the impact of developing civilisations, industrialisation and militarisation, began to determine the fate of the planet.[11] New materialism advocates pushing thinking back beyond the Anthropocene, beyond the human, with the aim of placing the material essences of the planet at the centre of ecological and ethical thought (Benson, 2019). Within my practice, I consider Soane's wall surrounding the Bank of England primarily in material terms – as stone. Stone, however shaped by human hand, remains stone, although its constitution and provenance are particular – possessing the properties of material(s) of oolitic limestone and being sourced from a quarry on the island of Portland near Weymouth. The geological origins of this matter provide motivating factors (psychological and aesthetic) for my photographic survey of the Bank's exterior form – the camera revealing within its photographic mimicry of eroded stone surfaces, particles of shell and other Jurassic fossil remnants. The worked (quarried, transported, shaped, constructed) nature of the stone also brings ecological and ethical concerns into play.

Consideration of the mind and its role (and whether it has one) in conferring identity onto things has remained a core philosophical question. If the material world exists independent of the human mind (as the essential new materialist position would have it), then, as DeLanda asks: "if the mind is not what gives identity to mountains and rivers, plants and animals, then what does?" (Dolphijn and van der Tuin, 2012, p.39). Towards an answer to this question, DeLanda first rejects what he labels as the essentialism of Aristotle's "essences".[12] DeLanda instead offers the following answer: "all objective entities are products of a historical process, that is, their identity is synthesized or produced as part of cosmological, geological, biological, or social history" (Ibid.). The premise of identity here, though, would seem to be at odds with the continual flows of material properties described by Ingold, suggesting as it does matter resolved, and implicating too some form of judgement reliant on the reductive dualism of nature and culture otherwise rejected in new materialist thinking. However,

[11] Although not scientifically recognised and with no agreed date for the commencement of the epoch, the Anthropocene is conceived as succeeding the Holocene at some point between 15000 years ago and the 1950s (Zalasiewicz, 2020).

[12] "Essences", as derived from Aristotle, is also a term or notion often invoked in the sphere of photographic theory, within discussion of the thing and its representation, including by Barthes (2000) and, albeit critically, by Batchen (1999) within his return to the origins of the medium.

DeLanda's emphasised assertion of matter's origination in the universe and its continued formation in geological time does chime with Smithson's preoccupations (as evident within the *Passaic* article discussed later in this thesis) pursued throughout his varied practice, with and without photography. Deleuze and Guattari's model of "double articulation" (of forms into substances and substances into forms), closely interpreted by DeLanda in his search for an answer to material identity, also conveys a Smithsonian concern for geological process and action (Ibid.). In the source text of Deleuze and Guattari, *double articulation* is described thus:

> In a geological stratum, for example, the first articulation is the process of "sedimentation," which deposits units of cyclic sediment according to a statistical order: flysch, with its succession of sandstone and schist. The second articulation is the "folding" that sets up a stable functional structure and effects the passage from sediment to sedimentary rock. (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988, p.41)

Along with other formulations of theory and a listing of coined terms, Deleuze and Guattari employ the model of double articulation within complex analogies constructed to illuminate abstract compositions and workings of capitalism and State. Such discussion is an intertwining of matter with the immaterial – the invisible revealed through materialised thought. Deleuze and Guattari's conceptualising of matter extends, reflexively, to the form and content of their jointly authored book:

> A book is neither object nor subject; it is made of variously formed matters, and very different dates and speeds. To attribute the book to a subject is to overlook this working of matters, and the exteriority of their relations. It is to fabricate a beneficent God to explain geological movements. (Ibid., p.3)

The authors consider the identity of a book through the cumulative lens of many of the concepts, largely premised on materialities, conceived and applied within the stratified text of *A Thousand Plateaus* (1988). Deleuze and Guattari's invocation of an invented God to determine identity stresses the unfixed nature of matter and leads to their proclamation of the book as an "*assemblage*" (Ibid., p.4).[13] They cite the various types of "strata and segmetarities" etc. that constitute literature and a (their) book, invoking

[13] Likewise, Karen Barad conceives of a book as a multi-directional and entangled intra-active process involving broad flows of matter, human and non-human, tangible and intangible (Barad, 2007, p.ix).

the analogous notion of the rhizome: a "multiplicity" developing in all directions from a horizontal mid-point, as from the tuber of a plant (Ibid., pp.6-7). Deleuze and Guattari claim the value of the rhizome over roots and the form of a tree "which plots a point, fixes an order" (Ibid.).

Consideration of the materialities of text and language have informed this study, as demonstrated through the applied form of descriptive close reading that contributes to its narrative, in both textual and visual terms. The form of text is also a relevant concern of matter explicit in the writing of Walter Benjamin and other authors cited in the thesis. Particularities of layout and design are fundamental elements of Smithson's published artworks, such as the *Passaic* article, for example, that provides the focus of Chapter Four. This aligning of text with other forms of assembled or assembling matter, whether mineral or organic, has lent this study a means of conceptualising, imagining and, ultimately, encountering the stone and architecture of Soane's wall at the Bank of England. The wall itself was formed as an assemblage of Soane's architectural ideas (now slightly subverted by early twentieth-century interventions – and intimidated by the great white mass of the recessed modern edifice that bears down from above). My photographs re-fragment this assemblage of stone and its composite matter. Through this process of fragmentation, I have sought to facilitate a reassembling of the *idea* of the whole (the Bank of England), but in ways that allow a conceptual breaching of otherwise unyielding surfaces and forms. In this way, the resolution of my practice has concurred with a synthesis of theory, as introduced and surveyed in this chapter, bringing matter to the fore.

This chapter has acknowledged the value of photographic theory but identified an impasse seemingly preventing it from moving forward. The simple acknowledgement that, rather than resolved as a fixed identity, matter (such as might constitute a thing) is instead, independent of the mind and the judgement of culture, a continuous flow and constant reforming of material properties, changes the way photography can be thought. This philosophical approach negates, for example, Elkins's insistence on the real, such as seems to form the basis of his own enquiry into the nature of photography (Elkins, 2011). The rootedness of matter in deep cosmological time demands a reassessment also of a photograph's relation to now and to the past and to

reconceptualized history. Thus, new materialism offers photography an avenue to travel towards the realisation of the ineffable or elusive subject resolved as (unresolved and perhaps invisible) matter in vital, entangled flux. My photographic encounters with the properties of material of Soane's wall register acknowledgement of this potential. The form of extended speculative and uncertain scrutiny my encounters provoked me towards – as pursued through the mechanism of the camera – equate, in terms of sight and cognition, with a compromised or inhibited process of reading through which I gleaned cursory information rather than facts. Through lens optics and ground-glass viewing screen, I scanned the form and surface of Soane's wall as an incomplete and not totally coherent text, constructing as I did so a record of my semblance of understanding. My movement, however compromised by bodily self-awareness and physical awkwardness inherent to the photographic act, invited some degree of revelation partially resolved in the resulting photographs.

Deep looking, as redefined from the idea of close reading, and the residue of description it forms, has been identified in this chapter as a means by which to bring to light, apposite to new materialist intentions, properties of materials significant to the subjects of study addressed in the chapters that follow. This address will further illuminate the core ideas of the study, as enacted within the evolved loose and openly subjective methodology of the practice. The materiality of description itself, if considered in expanded terms of matter advocated by new materialist theory, has agency towards the making material of that which is abstract.

New materialism's insistence, within some strands of its thinking, on the inherently active nature of the properties and capabilities of matter – articulated through the use of such terms as *agency* and *vibrancy* – is further addressed in the chapter that follows. Such forces, contingent or otherwise, springing from or impacting upon a range of matters significant to, or implicated within, the physical act of photography, are considered, including in context with Roland Barthes's (2000) search for photography's *affect* – the overriding subject of the chapter. Barthes's proposition of *punctum* as an affecting agential force remains significant to the developing discussion.

The animation of apparently inert matter that is the promise of such agency, as experienced within the act of photography or residing within the object of the photograph itself, is a phenomenon, physical as well as merely abstract, integral to the enquiry of this study. Such agential potential and its residing in matter has been acknowledged within the rehearsal of my practice at site at the Bank of England. Its legacy is imprinted into the matter of the resulting photographs. Recognition and openness to such agency, as validated by new materialist theory, including as introduced in this chapter and as discussed in the chapters that follow, has thus informed, in wilfully allegorical and subjective terms, the methodology of making of the photographs that comprise *BANK*. This regard for photography, through the lens of new materialism, contributes to this study's reconceptualising of what photography is – an essence combining operator and process, nature and culture. The subject to which this discursive exploration of the medium is directed, Soane's wall at the Bank of England, has facilitated an engagement enacted in physical terms of matter at site – an engagement that, justified in new materialist terms, extends material consideration to that which is invisible, namely the abstract nature of capital that the subject signifies. This application of theory, specifically that derived from new materialism, to the making of practice, facilitates a development of the argument of this thesis, establishing the basis of photography and perception in matter. This research moves towards resolving, in part through the removal of binary oppositions in thought, and the bringing together of nature and culture, an identified impasse in thinking photography. This adoption and appropriation of theory, as also enacted within practice, has pointed towards a reconfiguring of what photography is, and towards recognising photography's ability to avoid the pitfall, as identified by Brecht with respect to the photographic representation of reality, of the reification and attendant functionalisation of reality. The value, in this respect, of affect (as variously interpreted in this chapter) to photography has been established and is discussed further in the context of this research as the primary concern of the chapter that follows.

## Chapter Two

## Affect and agency – from Barthes to new materialism

Affect and agency are terms applied contentiously within critical discussion of photography and within theories of materialism and new materialism, as introduced and contextualised in Chapter One. The broadening scope of this chapter's content builds out from the themes of the previous chapter, in line with new materialism's extended conceptions of matter. The resulting discussion is informed by, and responds to, an emphasis on matter, as acknowledged within the methodologies of practice enacted within this study – within encounter at the Bank of England. So pursued, my practice has sought to open to affect expanded and entangled matters of subject and object – including those of photographer, camera and raw architectural form. This chapter further articulates relational phenomena of matter and affect – including as pertinent to photography.

With respect to photography, the import of affect can be attributed to Barthes's discursive engagement with the idea in *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (2000). This chapter acknowledges the recourse to phenomenological concerns, relevant to affect, made by new materialist scholars in their defining of human experience – of 'being' in a new materialist world. Also noted is the contrasting unequivocal rejection of this philosophical position by other voices in the sphere of new materialism. My position in relation to this 'school' of theory (as brought to bear within my practice), regarding concerns of affect and agency in particular, is also established. A comparison of imagery and ideas, relevant to Barthes's text, foregrounds particular concerns of matter, philosophy and the mechanics of phenomenology and perception. Comparison with new materialism's accommodation (or otherwise) of affect and agency within theory foregrounding matter over mind qualifies this discussion. Identification, within specific photographs, of affect and the manner of its operation is complemented by discussion of an example, rooted in philosophical ideas, of affect's manifestation as articulated in literary form. These eclectic examples have facilitated, through their synthesis and relation to theory, a focus on both materialist and new materialist concerns, such as have informed the development and resolution

of the photographic outcomes of this study. The distillation of Barthes's affect and of the mechanisms of its operation within new materialist thought, can facilitate, the chapter demonstrates, a deeper appreciation of the significance of *matter* to photography and photographic representation. The concluding outcomes of this discussion set parameters for the study of a photograph by Bernd and Hilla Becher pursued in the chapter that follows. Long quotations are incorporated into this writing in order to retain the 'voice' of the author – integrating into the argument of the chapter itself an enhanced material essence of the original wordings. In this sense the author's quoted words, as materially formed on the page, speak for themselves.

The chapter's interweaving of subjects, themes, ideas and theory serves to further establish the raison-d'être for the conceptualisation, imagining, methodological approach and visual resolution of the practice that has emerged from this study. The conferring of some form of agency onto the matter of the thing and the photograph claims territory towards realising the revelatory mechanics of photographic imaging and images. The chapter demonstrates that such agential concerns, to whatever degree they are manifest or precisely defined, extend phenomenologically to physical and psychological human confrontations, intentioned or otherwise, with matter – enacted or experienced as viewer, participant or performer. The practice that has resulted from this study has embraced these agential mechanics. The value of new materialist thinking, considered in context with phenomenologically influenced texts and theory, to thinking and making photography, is further established.

*Affect*, as defined and discussed by Barthes, was derived by him from psychology and phenomenology. His aim in appropriating this term was to come to an understanding about the position of "Photography" between empirical facticity and nothingness:

> First of all, I did not escape, or try to escape, from a paradox: on the one hand the desire to give a name to Photography's essence and then to sketch an eidetic science of the Photograph; and on the other the intractable feeling that Photography is essentially (a contradiction in terms) only contingency, singularity, risk: my photographs would always participate, as Lyotard says, in "something or other": is not the very weakness of Photography, this difficulty in existing which we call banality? (Barthes, 2000, p.20)

Implicit in Barthes's reflection here on the tricky nature and ontology of photography – expressed in terms of how difficult photography is to describe or comprehend, as a medium and as process of mediation – is a criticism of photography's limitation, ultimately, in terms of what it can truly reveal to the viewer (beyond the banality of existence) about the world. Barthes's inability to identify what photography is, coupled with his troubled sense of its contingent nature, can be placed alongside Brecht's questioning of the medium's ability to fully reveal the reality it purports to show. The concerns of both Barthes and Brecht suggest something missing, either within the photograph itself or within its potential to accurately mediate its subject. The sense of absence Barthes perceives is couched by him in relation to "essence" (a term which has, since Aristotle, been a foundation of philosophical thinking regarding concerns of matter), in itself implicates materiality. Materiality here, within and beyond Barthes's thinking, can be that which pertains to the thing photographed, or to the physical and performative actions and processes of photographing – with and in camera, or to the thing as it appears in the photograph, or to the properties of the photograph as an object (or thing), or to the person and the process of their viewing or encountering of the photograph – and thus by extension to the environment within which their viewing or encountering takes place. Such an extended consideration of materiality (and of material properties) conforms to new materialist conceptions of matter, as here:

> According to the new materialisms, if everything is material inasmuch as it is composed of physiochemical processes, nothing is reducible to such processes, at least as conventionally understood. For materiality is always something more than "mere" matter: an excess, force, vitality, relationality, or difference that renders matter active, self-creative, productive, unpredictable. In sum, new materialists are rediscovering a materiality that materializes, evincing immanent modes of self-transformation that compel us to think of causation in far more complex terms; to recognize that phenomena are caught in a multitude of interlocking systems and forces and to consider anew the location and nature of capacities for agency. (Coole and Frost, 2010, p.9)

Coole and Frost here acknowledge the active nature of matter in terms of the myriad forces that form and reform it and which lend it the capacity for agency. Such identified "unpredictability" of materiality, in these new materialist terms, refutes the possibility of definitive, or objective, understanding of matter – and is a refutation also of the veracity of photographic representation. The emphasis too on "causation" suggests, in

a photographic context, considering photographs as a process, rather than a fixing of matter.

Before embarking on his testing of affect, Barthes cites the work of particular photographers in which he claims no interest: "... there are moments when I detest Photographs: what have I to do with Atget's old tree trunks ...?" (Barthes, 2000, p.16). Barthes is referring here, it can be reasonably assumed, to photographs of trees Atget made in places on the outskirts of Paris, such as Trianon, Parc de Sceaux and Parc St Cloud. Although these photographs are without people, trees, especially as planted and grown in the rarefied constructed environments where Atget's subjects were located, are loaded with a certain import (if only in a poetic sense) in relation to human existence. At the forefront of such significance is the growth of a tree considered in relation to time (in this respect providing an apt subject for a camera as analogously defined by Barthes as a "clock[ ] for seeing" (Ibid., p.15). Trees (and their photographic representations) can therefore signify a variety of conditions between status and mortality, signalling power and tradition (the mighty oak – perhaps), or conversely evoking sadness or melancholy.

Barthes's locating of affect in terms of its origins in phenomenology is further outlined here:

> Next, my phenomenology agreed to compromise with a power, *affect*; affect was what I didn't want to reduce; being irreducible, it was thereby what I wanted, what I ought to reduce the Photograph to; but could I retain an affective intentionality, a view of the object which was immediately steeped in desire, repulsion, nostalgia, euphoria? (Barthes, 2000, pp.20-21)

In his quest to hold on to his "affective intentionality", Barthes continues his search for the essence of photography (and does so in accentuated material terms):

> Of course I could make out in Photography, in a very orthodox manner, a whole network of essences: material essences (necessitating the physical, chemical, optical study of the Photography), and regional essences (deriving, for instance, from aesthetics, from History, from Sociology)... (Ibid., 2000, p.21)

An Atget photograph of a tree trunk can be searched for its network of essences whose accentuated material concerns, in keeping with Barthes's outline, link nature just as firmly to culture. The essence of a photograph, Barthes contends, cannot be separated from "pathos" (Ibid.). In suggesting such a connection, he aligns affect with emotion – most literally with sadness or melancholy. In so doing, he avoids a logical, or *objective*, scrutiny of the photograph: "As *Spectator* I was interested in Photography only for sentimental reasons; I wanted to explore it not as a question (a theme) but as a wound: I see, I feel, hence I notice, I observe, and I think" (Ibid.). Barthes's accentuation of subjectivity suggests an encounter with photography that is physical as well as mental. The minimal and restricted content of Atget's photographs of the trunks of old trees may have been problematic for Barthes physiologically as well as psychologically – and dismissed for falling short on those subjective and emotional terms.

Atget's photographs of tree trunks call to mind another material manifestation of a tree and its affect – this time described in highly subjective terms in literary form. The tree in question appears in Jean-Paul Sartre's novel, *Nausea*[14], and works physiologically and psychologically on Antoine Roquentin, protagonist of the diaristic day-to-day narrative. This chestnut tree, its dark roots in particular, induce an excessive and unsettling revelation of nausea (a sudden shock of realisation – of the freedom and individual responsibility of self) in Roquentin, experienced in a flash but expressed over several pages, culminating as here: "That moment was extraordinary. I was there, motionless and frozen, plunged into a horrible ecstasy. But, in the very heart of that ecstasy, something new had just appeared; I understood the Nausea, I possessed it." (Sartre, 1963, pp.187-188).

The momentary heightened emotional effect of this *nausea*, induced by experience of the raw materiality of the world and nature, can be considered in terms of its equivalence to Barthes's notion of *affect* as it emanates from a photograph. This comparison seems all the more pertinent given the very visual characteristics (a mix

[14] First published as *La Nausée* (1938). It is interesting to note that Barthes's *Camera Lucida* (2000) was written "in homage to" Sartre's book of philosophy on the nature of imagination, *L'Imaginaire* (1940).

of description, imaginings and divination) of Sartre's text. For example, in establishing the circumstances of this 'attack' of nausea, the protagonist's first-person narration (the book is written as a diary) describes his encounter with the tree and its roots in precise (if exaggerated and over-wrought) detail:

> That root [...] existed in so far that I could not explain it. Knotty, inert, nameless, it fascinated me, filled my eyes, repeatedly brought me back to its own existence. It was no use my repeating: 'It is a root' – that didn't work any more. I saw clearly that you could not pass from its function as a root, as a suction pump, *to that*, to that hard, compact sea-lion skin, to that oily, horny, stubborn look. The function explained nothing; it enabled you to understand in general what a root was, but not *that one* at all. That root, with its colour, its shape, its frozen movement, was ... beneath all explanation. (Ibid., p.186)

Roquentin's account can be read and imagined transposed as a photographer's obsessive confrontation with the roots of a tree, the end result of which, in search of "explanation", would be a photograph. The passage can also be re-imagined, relevant to the nature of Barthes's enquiry, as an encounter with a photograph of a chestnut tree root and as an attempt, however affected, to comprehend that photograph's content – *that* tree root. If it were to exist, such a photograph, showing the equivalent to this particular sight Sartre had Roquentin see, might plausibly trigger in the viewer the sudden onset of nausea. Of course, such a response may be in marked contrast to the limited degree of psychological influence that Atget's photographs, accepting their apparent 'straight-forward' objectivity, might be expected to exert. Even if considered in rational or sober terms, the mental translation of experience, shifting from the viewed miniaturized two-dimensional representation to its imagined three-dimensional reality, can be disquieting or uncanny. The Surrealist's celebration of Atget's wider body of photographic work attests to such potential, as does Barthes's own psychological responses to photographs in which he does find interest. Some of Atget's photographs of the trunks and extended roots of trees do verge on the extraordinary, purely in terms of the complex forms they depict (going some way to emulate or even exaggerate Roquentin's vision). These examples (Fig. 2) are even more extraordinary for how the matter of those forms is delineated and described aesthetically by the material properties of the photograph (properties retained or strongly suggested even within the photograph's mechanical reproduction).

Fig. 2: *Tree Roots*, Eugène Atget (1924), black and white photograph.

Atget's photographs of tree trunks are immediately strange simply because of the peculiar ordinariness of their subject – they are just trees, after all. This is the ordinariness that apparently left Barthes cold. The formal peculiarity of these photographs extends to their abrupt cropping, the trunks cut off at a level often just a few feet from the ground. The finely rendered detail of these apparently inconsequential subjects accentuates a strangeness of intent or purpose, inviting the question: what are these photographs for? (a question Barthes must have posed to himself within his rejection of them). Stranger in a more overt sense are those examples where Atget has aimed his camera directly at the base of a tree and its spread of twisting roots clinging to sloping ground. These slanting compositions give the impression, probably falsely, that Atget, at odds with his unaffected method, has neglected to level the camera.

Sartre, expressing his raw existential philosophy through the troubled reasoning of Roquentin, identifies, in common with Barthes, the condition of contingency somewhere within the tenuous relationship between appearance and understanding: "The essential thing is contingency. I mean that, by definition, existence is not

necessity. To exist is simply *to be there*; what exists appears, lets itself be *encountered*, but you can never *deduce* it" (Ibid., p.188). Phenomenological ideas, with which Sartre was familiar and at least partially aligned, triggered Barthes's own "project" to search for affect (Barthes, 2000, p.20). The philosophical methods Barthes subsequently proposes and tests, affirms correspondence, regarding perception, between experience of a photograph and experience of the worldly material phenomenon the photograph purports to depict. Barthes's proclaiming of a photograph's definitive status as a referent of reality supports this: "I call "photographic referent" not the *optionally* real thing to which an image or a sign refers but the *necessarily* real thing which has been placed before the lens, without which there would be no photograph" (Ibid., p.76). How a thing is perceived in three-dimensional reality, through encounter, can be usefully re-examined, Barthes's seems to suggest, through encounter with that reality mimicked in photographic form – his layered account, invoking *studium* (a sense of general interest) and *punctum*, of physiologically and psychologically experiencing a photograph, demonstrates this potential.

The mechanics of perception in play within direct mindful experience of a thing – such as a tree, or its roots – can also be considered alongside the process of perceiving as enacted within the physical and mental *performance* of taking or making photographs. Such a physicality and psychology of spatial encounter with a three-dimensional *phenomenon* acts out the philosophising of a range of thinkers located within one strand of phenomenological thought or another. Barthes's evolved method employed in search of affect – affect acting indirectly from a photograph, rather than from three-dimensional reality – is most closely aligned, if only through his pointed reference to "eidetic science" (Ibid.), with the thinking of Edmund Husserl[15] on perception. This reference lends a semblance of objectivity – counter to subjectivity – to Barthes's conception. Husserl further oriented the process of perception in the realm of objectivity (that "science" suggests) through his applied philosophical analyses of *bracketing* (or "parentheses") and *epoché* – which contends that a "phenomenon is no more an individual and contingent fact, either historical or empirical, but it is observed,

[15] Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) was the main original exponent of the branch of philosophy known as Phenomenology. Barthes's thinking, as developed within *Camera Lucida* (2000), was particularly influenced by Husserl's ideas, as indicated above.

looked at and described in its essential sense" (Farina, 2014, pp.53-54). In demonstrating such methodologies of *reductive* deduction (reduction here being the cause of some regret for Barthes within his approximate appropriation of this methodology applied to photographs), Husserl chooses, as the phenomenon to be perceived, the example of a tree:

> "In" the reduced perception (in the phenomenologically pure mental process), we find, as indefeasibly belonging to its essence, the perceived as perceived, to be expressed as "material thing," "plant," "tree," "blossoming;" and so forth. ... The *tree simpliciter*, the physical thing belonging to Nature, is nothing less than this *perceived tree as perceived* which, as perceptual sense, inseparably belongs to the perception. The tree simpliciter can burn up, be resolved into its chemical elements, etc. But the sense – the sense *of this* perception, something belonging necessarily to its essence – cannot burn up; it has no chemical elements, no forces, no real properties. (Husserl, 1983, §89, p.216 (184) – *italics* as in original translation.)

Husserl's text is included here as it links, in material terms, his thinking – through the material thing of the tree – not only to Barthes but also to the work of Atget (and thus to photography) and back to Sartre (and thus back to the materiality of the text itself – as manifest in the quotations inserted within the body of the thesis). Husserl's subjection of the tree to ruin and the dispersal of its material properties also corresponds with Smithson's ideas on entropy discussed in Chapter Four.

The philosophy of phenomenology was pursued, at degrees of variance, by Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, Heidegger and Sartre et al. through the course of the first half of the twentieth century. Despite their differences (not the subject of this thesis), the work of all builds on previous generations of thinkers and critiques, in particular, René Descartes's defining concept of existence that establishes the relationship between *Nature* and *Culture* – such as binds a worldly thing, in terms of its existence, to the human mind (Smith, 2018). The question of how the physical world is mentally and bodily experienced, negotiated and understood is common to philosophical thought in the orbit of phenomenology. Theories of perception naturally dominate this discourse. In his articulation of the process of perceiving an object (or thing – or phenomenon), Henri Bergson constructs a text that directly aligns the act of seeing (and the mental

and physical process of comprehending what we see) with photography.[16] The emphasis Bergson places, within his account, on the properties and dynamics of matter, is also notable:

> The whole difficulty of the problem that occupies us comes from the fact that we imagine perception to be a kind of photographic view of things, taken from a fixed point by that special apparatus which is called an organ of perception – a photograph which would then be developed in the brain-matter by some unknown chemical and psychical process of elaboration. But is it not obvious that the photograph, if photograph there be, is already taken, already developed in the very heart of things and at all points of space? No metaphysics, no physics can escape this conclusion. Build up the universe with atoms: each of them is subject to the action, variable in quantity and quality according to the distance, exerted on it by all material atoms. Bring in Faraday's centres of force: the lines of force emitted in every direction from every centre bring to bear upon each the influences of the whole material world. Call up the Leibnizian monads: each is the mirror of the universe. All philosophers, then, agree on this point. Only if when we consider any other given place in the universe we can regard the action of all matter as passing through it without resistance and without loss, and the photograph of the whole as translucent: here there is wanting behind the plate the black screen on which image could be shown. Our 'zones of indetermination' play in some sort the part of the screen. They add nothing to what is there; they effect merely this: that the real action passes through, the virtual action remains. (Bergson, 2004, pp.31-32)

In simply articulating what it is to see and to perceive, Bergson brings into play strings of matter that extend from the single atom to the universe. Resolving this materiality are the abstract and invisible (but still material) energies of physics. Material also is the "brain-matter" that holds the virtual photograph that "remains". Such a foregrounding of matter of course chimes with the theory of new materialism – even to the extent of Bergson's insistence on the active persistence of matter independent from the mind. Although also concerned with memory in relation to perception (how memory facilitates perception), Bergson prioritises matter within experience – in search of "pure perception", as separate and distinct from "pure memory" (Bergson, 2004). However, the process of memory including as posited by Bergson, has understandably become central (as a temporal concern), to the theorising of photography – and is of course key to Barthes's fascination with the medium – acting

[16] This text comes from Bergson's book *Matter and Memory* (2004), published in French as *Matière et Mémoire* (1908 – fifth edition).

as a possible trigger for punctum. The mindful human connotations of the concept and actions of memory, and the relation of memory to matter, are rethought within new materialist thinking. Barad, in a passage as fluid and metaphysical as Bergson's, defines memory in active terms as "enfolded articulations", and remembering as an "enlivening", effected through processes of "reconfiguring", "re-cognizing", "intra-action" and "entanglements":

> Memory does not reside in the folds of individual brains; rather, memory is the enfoldings of space-time-matter written into the universe, or better, the enfolded articulations of the universe in its mattering. Memory is not a record of a fixed past that can ever be fully or simply erased, written over, or recovered (that is, taken away or taken back into one's possession, as if it were a thing that can be owned). And re-membering is not a replay of a string of moments, but an enlivening and reconfiguring of past and future that is larger than any individual. Re-membering and re-cognizing do not take care of, or satisfy, or in any other way reduce one's responsibilities; rather, like all intra-actions, they extend the entanglements and responsibilities of which one is a part. The past is never finished. It cannot be wrapped up like a package, or a scrapbook, or an acknowledgment; we never leave it and it never leaves us behind. (Barad, 2007, p.ix)

As author, Barad has here invoked memory within playful reflection on the coming into being of her ideas and her writing. Her thinking, like Bergson's, has extended space, time and matter out from the matter of the individual mind to the limits of the universe. She has placed herself, as matter, within the flows of matter. The matter of Barad's published text (the subject of her reflection), addresses the science of quantum mechanics, bringing new materialist thinking to bear on time. For her the important point being:

> ... that time, like space and matter, is phenomenonal (i.e., time is not an external parameter but rather is an integral aspect of phenomena). As a result of the iterative nature of intra-active practices that constitute phenomena, the "past" and the "future" are iteratively reconfigured and enfolded through one another: phenomena cannot be located in space and time; rather, phenomena are material entanglements that "extend" across different spaces and times. (Ibid., pp.316-317)

The concerns of this thesis locate the photographer, viewer or reader within entanglements of matter enfolded within the universe. Memory and perception, including as significant to photography, can be defined as human participations "*within*

nature" (Barad, 1999, p.7). This positioning of the human in relation to nature, Barad intends, "allows a new formulation of realism (and truth) that is not premised on the representational nature of knowledge." Barad's theory, encapsulated in her notion of "agential realism", acknowledges human "intra-act[ion]" with nature, counter to the idea of "some imagined and idealized human-independent reality" (Ibid., p.7).[17]

In their defining of what new materialism is, Dolphijn and van der Tuin precis Barad's ideas and invoke her applied terminology:

> Not primarily interested in representation, signification, and disciplinarity, new materialism is fascinated by affect, force, and movement as it travels in all directions. It searches not for the objectivity of things in themselves but for an objectivity of actualization and realization. It searches for how matter comes into agential realism, how matter is materialized in it. It is interested in speeds and slowness, in how the event unfolds according to the in-between, according to intra-action. New materialism argues that we know nothing of the (social) body until we know what it can do. It agrees with studying the multiplicity of modes that travel natureculture as the perpetual flow it has always already been. (Dolphijn and van der Tuin, 2012, p.113)

The "perpetual flow" of the widest conceptions of matter, again echoing Bergson's imagining of perception, can be considered in equally analogous terms to photography and the taking and making of a photograph. Barad's notions of enactment, entanglement and intra-action can be combined to articulate the mental and physical processes of prolonged looking inherent to the activity of close reading discussed in Chapter One. Here too, another Baradian term evoking a to-and-fro of agency and action can be cited; that of response-ability – in this case, the ability of response of *reader* and of material object or thing:

> First of all, agency is about response-ability, about the possibilities of mutual response, which is not to deny, but to attend to power imbalances. Agency is about possibilities for worldly re-configurings. So agency is not something possessed by humans, or non-humans for that matter. It is an enactment. And it enlists, if you will, "non-humans" as well as "humans". (Barad, interviewed in Dolphijn and van der Tuin, 2012, p.55)

[17] The title of Barad's key text, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, indicates a coming together of nature and culture, acknowledging a "lack" of "independent, self-contained existence" (Barad, 2007, p.ix).

Translated to the process of close reading, in a form that practices description rather than critique, "the possibilities of mutual response", such as could represent the possibility for "worldly re-configurings", becomes the mutual response between the human reader and the non-human matter of the photograph closely read. The mutual response of reader *to* photograph and photograph *to* reader constitutes an "enactment," in Barad's terms, that "enlists", as its agency, both human and non-human elements. It must be acknowledged that a photograph is itself, through the process of its coming into being, within its own enactment, a complex entanglement, in Baradian terms, of human and non-human matter. Deeply entangled within this set of mutual responses is the human and non-human matter of the thing photographed. Mutual response, as conceived and applied by Barad, brings together nature and culture, as a set of intra-actions, rather that setting them against each other (as either / or) and so demonstrates human participation *within* nature. The "power imbalances" between photograph and reader are attended to within re-configurings that occur through the spatial and temporal enactment of reading (and describing) a photograph. In this context, such material re-configuring equates to (the possibility for) revelation and understanding.

Within the diverse range of approaches and applications that constitute new materialist theory, individual scholars confer agency on matter in very different ways. Jane Bennett, for example, proclaims matter's activity in direct terms. In the first chapter of her book *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (2009), Bennett is concerned with how objects, that she initially describes as "found objects" but materially redefines as *things*, can become:

> ... vibrant things with a certain effectivity of their own, a perhaps small but irreducible degree of independence from the words, images and feelings they provoke in us. I present this as liveliness intrinsic to the materiality of the thing formerly known as the object. (Bennett, 2009, p.xvi)

The ascribing of "liveliness" to things encourages a deeper regard for the significance of matter, Bennett argues. The foregrounding of matter as the *active* solution, rather than the cause, can, she asserts, address problematic real-world events with more certain purpose and greater effect. Bennett defines the matter of inanimate things in

terms of "agency" or "effectivity" – and their potential as an "actant", a term that she takes up from Bruno Latour, interpreting it thus:

> ... actant is a source of action that can be either human or nonhuman; it is that which has efficacy, can do things, has sufficient coherence to make a difference, produce effects, alter the course of events. (Bennett, 2009, p.iix)

Bennett identifies and draws out the propensity of objects, in their designated status as things, to animate. This she does through a process, enacted within her text, of description, beginning with a simple list of things seen:

> one large men's black plastic work glove
> one dense mat of oak pollen
> one unblemished dead rat
> one white plastic bottle cap
> one smooth stick of wood
> (Ibid., p.5)

Here, in a matter-of-fact style, not dissimilar to Perec's text referenced in the previous chapter, Bennett lists things seen – individual things she saw grouped within the confines of a metal grating covering a storm drain, in an encounter that took place one morning in Baltimore. She goes on to describe these items in terms that signal their affect. Essentially, their affect is to simply be noticed – and thus described:

> When the materiality of the glove, the rat, the pollen, the bottle cap, and the stick started to shimmer and spark, it was in part because of the contingent tableau that they formed with each other, with the street, with the weather that morning, with me. For had the sun not glinted on the back glove, I might not have seen the rat; had the rat not been there, I might not have noted the bottle cap, and so on. But they *were* all there just as they were, and so I caught a glimpse of an energetic vitality inside each of these things, things that I generally conceived as inert. (Ibid.)

The "energetic vitality" observed in these things confirms for Bennett the vibrancy of matter. The animation of matter this vibrancy implies signals the potential of things as *actants*. Bennett's assertion that things as autonomous matter disconnected from human intervention have vitality, has value, complimentary to ideas formulated by

Barad, considered in relation to photography. Bennett's thinking itself references theories of phenomenology previously distilled by Barthes within his discussion of photography. Barad's conceptions of nature/culture intra-actions also make Barthes's notions of affect and punctum seem all the more plausible and useful, employed, including in a new materialist context, towards understanding the flows of matter that define what photography is.

Tim Ingold, in distancing himself from the abstract nature of much new materialist theory, argues that to confer on objects the potential to affect is not a useful way to consider the nature of their matter or state of materiality. In fact, Ingold rejects the label of *object* (as accepted by other strands of new materialist thought), like Bennett replacing it with *thing* to signal a realignment of that thing with matter. An alignment giving primacy to the object as already formed matter is shifted to one proposing "an ontology that assigns primacy to processes of formation as against their final products, and to flows and transformations of materials as against states of matter." (Ingold, 2010, pp.2-3) This position thus throws into question the ability of affect to emanate from formed matter – formed as object – as for Ingold, quoting Paul Klee: ""Form is the end, death', he wrote. 'Form-giving is movement, action. Form-giving is life." [Klee, 1973, p.269]" (Ibid., p.2). Emphasis is here shifted from matter in its static formed state as object, to the flows of matter, in their broad scope, in the process of their forming or transforming – into a thing. (Ibid., pp.2-3) Conceptually, it must follow that the turning of the object into a thing can direct how a photographer regards the thing to be photographed – the shifting of this view premised on concerns of matter. Logical extension of this thinking suggests that such applied reconceptualization has the potential to inform how the content of a photograph might be regarded – and by further extension, how the photograph as a material artefact is viewed.

Ingold's articulation of the extended flows of matter which together, in their flowing, define, for him, the thingness of a tree, demonstrates the limitation to understanding inherent to the conceptualising of a tree as a *complete* object:

> There it is, rooted in the earth, trunk rising up, branches splayed out, swaying in the wind, with or without buds or leaves, depending on the season. Is the tree, then, an object? If so, how should we define it? What is tree and what is

> not-tree? Where does the tree end and the rest of the world begin? ... Is the bark, for example, part of the tree? If I break off a piece in my hand and observe it closely, I will doubtless find that it is inhabited by a great many tiny creatures that have burrowed beneath it and made their homes there. Are they part of the tree? And what of the algae that grow on the outer surfaces of the trunk or the lichens that hang from the branches? ... If we consider, too, that the character of this particular tree lies just as much in the way it responds to the currents of wind, in the swaying of its branches and the rustling of its leaves, then we might wonder whether the tree can be anything other than a tree-in-the-air. (Ibid., p.4)

The processes of formation and transformation to which he alludes in this passage articulate the layered depths of materiality that can be contemplated within a defining of thingness – such as is crucial to the revelation of understanding. Ingold's soberly considered questions and the processes they illuminate foreground the significance of movement to the realisation of the material essences of a tree. Movement signals activity (even if the tree is dead). The nature of the action and of its flow signal the potential for affect.

Ingold's descriptive account of a tree and the component parts that make up its thingness moves out from the thing of the tree itself and on towards a conclusion that is essentially abstract – thingness expanding into invisibility. Surrounding and extending ever outwards, from the matter of the tree and the forming and transforming forces and material phenomena through which it is constituted, is the limitless air. The narrative dynamics implicit in Ingold's conception of a tree-in-the-air (which, surprisingly, seems to ignore, in this iteration, its roots) brings time into play. Time, as the rings signifying a felled tree's previous growth attest, brings history into play. Such spatial and temporal conceptions of the material properties of things, transposed to photographic representation, point to the value of extending the search for understanding, of that which a photograph shows, to beyond the limits of the frame and moment of the shutter's release. The chapter that follows enacts such a search.

Within the narrative of *Nausea*, the "moment' of Roquentin's fixation on a tree root suggests an encounter which was – at *that* moment – static. However, movement drives the experience he relates (Sartre, 1963, p.149).

> Admittedly a movement was something different from a tree. But it was still an absolute. A thing. My eyes never met anything but repletion. There were swarms of existences at the ends of the branches, existences which constantly renewed themselves and were never born. The existing wind came and settled on the tree like a big fly; and the tree shivered. But the shiver was not a nascent quality, a transition from the potential to act; it was a thing; a thing-shiver flowed into the tree, took possession of it, shook it, and suddenly abandoned it, going further on to spin around by itself. (Ibid., p.190)

Movement, as recounted here, replicates the "in-the-air" material properties of Ingold's tree. Roquentin locates the materiality of trees in time and in existential and expressionistic flows of matter.

> That plane tree with its scaling bark, that half-rotten oak – they would have wanted me to take them for vigorous youthful forces thrusting towards the sky. And that root? I would probably have had to see it as a greedy claw, tearing the earth, snatching its food from it. (Ibid., p.191)

Sartre had Roquentin write the lengthy diary account from which these extracts are drawn on an unspecified Wednesday at six o'clock in the evening, his second entry that day. The previous day he had written, in a style more abrupt than even Perec's recording, "*Tuesday* Nothing. Existed.", thus drawing a resolutely static blank regarding matter and the flows of its properties of material (Ibid., p.149).

My sense of experience, experienced as physically enacting photographer encountering the affecting form of Soane's wall at the Bank of England, echoes that (as imagined by Sartre) of Roquentin, on finding himself in too close a proximity to the dark and inexplicable roots of a tree. Nausea, as a combined psychological and physical condition suffered by Roquentin, was the result of an affect, *on* him, that shot out in a punctum-like way from living and flowing organic matter. Punctum, to favour Barthes's terminology here, enters my photographs through their imagining, and through the processes of their physical registration through the device of the camera. My close proximity to the expansive surface of the giant *thing* immediately in front of me that my vision compulsively scanned triggered a punctum-like affect. It shot out from particular aberrations of form, or peculiarly etched or eroded details of stone, that lay in wait, held within surfaces and heavy masses of matter that constitute Soane's wall. I recognise that this agential force, as experienced under the circumstances I have

described, was to some extent preordained – having become to some degree psychosomatically expected. Confronting the wall, awkwardly distanced by the disorientation of my seeing – through the camera – the agency or vibrancy of stone and of its properties of materials remained sufficiently charged, enough to, in Barthes's terms, still "wound" or "cut". The wall, as a structure itself already uncanny in its affect became doubly so experienced within the act of photographing.

Barthes's problem with Atget's photographs of "old tree trunks" ultimately lay in his restricted view of them, the particular material things depicted seen as fixed and inert – this apparently mundane and unaffecting content further nullified by claustrophobic cropping. No acutely affecting punctum could shoot from outside the material limits of the photograph. As recorded specimens of nature, these representations, through their aesthetic appearance and banality, bear comparison with the Bechers' fastidious recordings of (man-made) industrial architecture. The tree as subject (variously framed – not always cut off at the trunk) constituted a theme within Atget's extensive photographic accumulation, just as the Bechers' photographs of blast furnaces formed a collection among collections within their equally vast and diverse oeuvre. Atget's photographs of Paris, albeit those depicting an emptied urban centre, are suggestive, according to Walter Benjamin (and cited by Barthes), of scenes of crimes (Benjamin, 1985, p.256). This conceptual triggering Benjamin may have experienced as affect. Atget's photographs forensically detailing cropped weighty tree trunks whose extensive knotty roots cling haphazardly to the earth, may possess similar agency for affect, such as could provoke a troubled or unsettling response. A Becher photograph of moribund industrial architecture equally expunged of life, such as will be the focus of the chapter that follows, may act on the viewer in similar irrational terms.

This range of this chapter's discussion has demonstrated that agential potential, to whatever degree manifest, or however precisely defined, extends phenomenologically to physical and psychological human confrontations, intentioned or otherwise, with matter – enacted or experienced as participant photographer or viewer. The practice of this study, through the physical manner of its making, as evidenced within the body of work that comprises *BANK*, has invited and embraced these unpredictable and capricious agential mechanics. The vibrancy of the matter of Soane's wall – vibrancy

shot out as dull light into the back of my camera – retains, this study claims, agency sufficient for affect. In this sense the photographs that comprise *BANK* can be read through the prism of this chapter's discussion of ideas central to texts of Barthes and Sartre. The visual content of these photographs has been determined by actions and processes of memory and perception, enacted in time, such as connect theories posited by Bergson to the cited reiterations and reworkings of the perceiving of matter asserted by new materialist scholars.

The individual photographs that comprise *BANK* are modest in terms of the nature of their content and the manner of their visual representation of architectural form. Their apparent simplicity would seem to negate any claim of the new such as might equate with new knowledge. However, I contend that new knowledge occurred within the process of photographing – shaped within my encounter with my subject. Ingold's fluid and ever-expanding conception of matter (as expressed by him through the matter of a tree), frees me to acknowledge my own matter and its fluidity, and the agency of that fluidity within the act of photography. Within this act, my own bodily and intellectually merged state of physical nature and learnt culture (of assumed knowledge and experience) meets the nature and culture of Soane's structure of fossil stone halfway. Expressed in this way, my act of photography becomes an intra-action (in Barad's terms). The photographs themselves are the residue or legacy of this intra-action. The next chapter expands the idea of fluid matter – to further illuminate the value to viewing and thinking photography of the widening, still further, of conceptual parameters.

This chapter has established connections between various theoretical and experienced positions regarding the agency of matter and how such potential for action (however conceived or physically manifest) impacts on our relationship with matter. The study has ranged across abstract, speculative and applied theory situated within various permutations of philosophical thinking. Its narrative, exploring real, photographic and literary examples, engaged the imaginary and the everyday. The discussion, with reference to particular and combined theories and methodologies, linked the actuality of physically encountering matter – in the world – with experience of matter photographically re-presented within the material properties of a photograph. This

approach has underlined the value of Barthes's notion of affect (as variously discussed in relation to agency, vibrancy and activity) to photographic thinking, and to the study of photographs. Including through extended reference to new materialist thinking, the chapter has recognised the significance of affect as a contingent force and its catalytic potential for revelation, including of that which a photograph does not directly show.

Within consideration of the content of the chapters that follow, ontology becomes useful as an overarching idea, in conjunction with other identified philosophical positions and concerns, as a way of conceiving and articulating the results of this research, including as realised through practice. Discussion within this framework moves the argument of the thesis forward towards a proposition, of what, in ontological terms, photography is, that merges variously thought matters of nature and culture. This use of ontology as vehicle to articulate the results of this study, in response to the research questions pursued, is placed in context, in the thesis conclusion, with André Bazin's (1960) ontological enquiry into the nature of photography. As now introduced, affect, as an idea and phenomenon, remains important to the further development of this enquiry and its argument – and to the enactment of practice. As defined affect, is further discussed, in the chapters that follow, in terms of its profundity as an agential force and as an element integral to the addressing of the ontological question posed above. In this context, affect is considered in relation to notions of time and history – such as are significant to the inherent nature and mechanics of photography, concerns of documentary practice, and the work of both the Bechers and Smithson – which forms the basis of discussion in the following two chapters. Mirrored within the practice of this study, such concerns, in new materialist terms, translate as agential properties, held in the temporal as well as vibrant spatial matter of Soane's wall at the Bank of England, that my (intra-)action as a photographer disturbs. This agency of history and its affect is thus sought through the act and process of making. The act of making, its flows of matter and its own vibrancy, the practice recognises, contribute to the essence of what photography is.

The next chapter's focus on the work of the Bechers further extends and expands, as indicated above, the direction of thought and practice of this study regarding the limits of matter, particular assemblages of matter, and the boundaries of a photograph.

## Chapter Three

## Looking for the *Affect* of History in the Photographic Work of Bernd and Hilla Becher.

This chapter focuses on a single photograph by German photographers Bernd and Hilla Becher. The Bechers are renowned, within critical historical accounts of late-twentieth-century documentary and art photography, for their career-long project photographing examples of industrial architecture – such as blast furnaces, water towers, cooling towers, pit heads, and various industrial façades. Although the Bechers began their work together in the early nineteen-sixties, their oeuvre and their methodology continue to influence succeeding generations of documentary photographers and artists. The reading of the photograph, *Blast Furnace, Hainer Hütte, Siegen, Germany, 1961* (Becher and Becher, 2005, p111), is initiated as a search for *affect* – the phenomenon of theory as principally derived from Barthes but also as distilled through the range of philosophical ideas, including those of new materialism, discussed in the preceding chapters.

This chapter's address, scrutiny and response to, an example drawn from the Bechers' oeuvre, provides further insight into the relevance to my critical enquiry of the agential potential of photography – as manifest through forces or flows of punctum, vibrancy or affect, or their equivalents. Such power of agency is identified, in accord with the enquiries pursued within the preceding chapters, as residing in properties of matter, including that of the photograph itself. The materially infused process of deep looking, enacted as close reading – describing content and material appearances of the photograph itself – extends beyond the limits of the photograph. This concern for that which a photograph does not show translates to my photographs of Soane's wall – the inevitable limitation of my mapping of surface and form simultaneously acknowledging the highly selective nature of my photographic survey. The Bechers' photograph is a fragment of an apparently hidden history. This history the chapter attempts to illuminate through acknowledgement and recognition of the flows of matter, in and through time and space. Recognised within such flows is the agency, or affect, of matter operating within and outside of the image frame.

The chapter builds on Chapter Two's further establishing of the value of matter thought in expanded vibrant and affecting terms in relation to photography. Its content, considered in terms of the broad scope of references made within it to historical as well as theoretical sources, and considered also in terms of the depth of its enquiry both within and beyond the limits of a photograph, constructs a study that is to some degree ontological in nature. Rethinking photography in terms of ontology, in a manner predicated on broad conceptions of matter, in line, again, with new materialist thinking, facilitates the moving forward of this research, serving to illuminate and clarify its developing argument. The varied address of the chapter, towards its subject (the photograph extracted from the oeuvre of Bernd and Hilla Becher), offers insight into ways of conceiving the ontological essence of a photograph – what a photograph, in an essential sense, *is*. The enquiry continues to challenge (documentary) photography's propensity towards reification of reality realised in simplistic and restricting terms. This reading of the Becher photograph is achieved through recourse to elementary research, expanding immediate knowledge of what the photograph shows. This perhaps obvious and even simplistic application of research within the photograph's reading serves to further illuminate, as in Brecht's critique, the limitations of documentary photography. That which the research reveals represents, in the province of the photograph, an elusive but nonetheless material history. My photographs of Soane's wall, informed by my study of the Becher photograph, demonstrate, through their, often uncertain, fixity on features of stone, their own limitation, as discrete photographs. Doubt infuses these photographs, a sense of unreliability projected through the coming together of ruined matter – that of the photograph's depicted subject and that of the photograph itself. This ruination, or its inference, is manifest also through the manner in which the photographs that collectively comprise *BANK* seemingly break their subject apart.

Critical discussion of the Bechers' work, due to the documentary context in which their photographs (even within presentation as art) were conceptualised, produced and disseminated, has been dominated by concerns of objectivity that deny subjective notions such as affect. Although not a contrived, planned or constructed element of a photograph, affect is nonetheless aligned here with Brecht's something "*built up*" or posed" – in that its contingent ability to function ensures that the photograph remains

active (retains the potential to act on the viewer), thus offering revelation beyond surface reading. The subjective counter to the presumed objectivity of the photograph offered by affect is considered, within this chapter, with a particular regard for history – how, in broader terms, affect can, should its agency be recognised, open a photograph so that history might be revealed. The photograph, showing the exterior form of the blast furnace, is scrutinised with Brecht's criticism of photography in mind – its apparent inability to reveal social concerns. This discursive study, reaching beyond typological and formal interpretation, reveals the history of the industrial site itself, identifying profound social, political and ideological concerns from which its photographic representation is dislocated. The personal connectedness of Bernd Becher to this site and to aspects of its history reveals a persistent subjectivity lying beneath the veneer of objectivity the Bechers' work presents to the viewer.

Method, rigorously applied, is acknowledged as key to the appearance of the Bechers' photographs, underpinning their status as authoritative documents of industrial architecture. The Bechers' works are much discussed in relation to the ontological nature of photography itself, the accuracy and fidelity of their photographs as direct traces of reality being a primary concern. Such discourse often aligns the typological intent of the Bechers' oeuvre with conceptual art. Discussion is also pursued in directly architectural terms, the design variants of the types of structures photographed comparatively studied. Critique of the Bechers' photographs rarely extends to political or social-historical contexts. Through extended description of what the photograph shows, this chapter offers an alternative way of reading the Bechers' work, foregrounding history and narrative – and inviting affect. The subjective bias to which such an individual reading is prone is mitigated by the length and depth of the exercise – allowing a sense of distance to be achieved. The duration of time spent with the photograph creates the conditions for affect and facilitates a deeper regard for matter: that of the depicted industrial fixture itself and of its reproduced photographic trace. The photograph and its subject are described acknowledging the status of each as things – their properties of materials considered in broad terms, both spatially and temporally. Considered in this way, much like Ingold's tree discussed in the previous chapter, the Bechers' blast furnace, as realised through the manner of its photographic reproduction, is acknowledged as a *blast-furnace-in-the-air* (the air itself being a

necessary material within the blast furnace's process of materially transforming ore into pig iron). Such a conception opens the photograph and its content and breaks the limits of its frame. The extended enactments of looking and describing, through encounter and the formation of text on the (digital) page, become material. This expanded approach is informed by thinking variously aligned with new materialism or derived from phenomenological and existential writing – as explored in the previous chapters. Such thinking was centred on the vibrancy of matter and interpretations of affect. As alluded to previously, this philosophy and derived methodology of looking and describing, through experience, enacted in (acknowledged) time, mirrors processes pursued and applied within the making of the photographs that comprise *BANK*. This approach, premised on (and visually analogous to) the notion of close reading, has informed, in physical as well as conceptual terms, the making of the video work, *City Circular*, that forms part of the practice of this study.

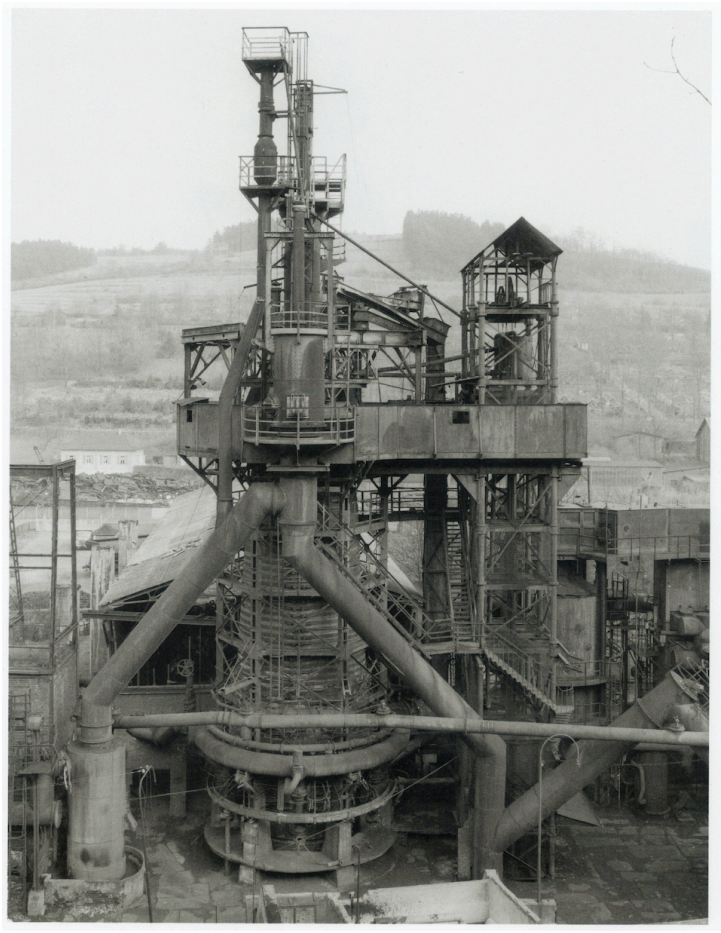

Fig. 3: *Blast Furnace, Hainer Hütte, Siegen, Germany 1961* – as it appears in: *Bernd and Hilla Becher: Basic Forms of Industrial Buildings* (Thames and Hudson, 2005, p.111), black and white photograph.

## The photograph, *Hainer Hütte blast furnace, Siegen, Germany, 1961*, closely read

*Blast Furnace, Hainer Hütte, Siegen, Germany, 1961* (Fig. 3 above, repeating Fig. 1) is an early example of Bernhard Becher's and Hilla Wobeser's work together and was included in their first book: *Anonyme Skulpturen* (Anonymous Sculpture), published in 1970. The photograph also appears in, among other volumes, *Bernd and Hilla Becher: Life and Work*. This later reproduction, due to its better reprographic quality, was chosen as the subject of this study. In seeking its affect, I view, experience and describe this photograph – the encounter of reading countering the aura of objectivity that surrounds the Bechers' work. As an example of this approach, a section of my text describing this photograph, and evidencing my subjective encounter with it and its broad scope of actual and insinuated properties of materials, is included below. The process of this reading provides, if shifted from miniature photographic representation to the three-dimensional heavy mass of architectural form, an echo of my physical, conceptual, (and psychological) experience of encounter with the Bank of England building – at the foot of Soane's wall.

### The photograph encountered

Blast furnaces are complicated structures, unlike the simpler forms of water towers or cooling towers the Bechers also photographed. Where the structure really begins appears unclear – with the pipes and elements of surrounding structures merging with the tower of the furnace itself. The circular base of the furnace is framed by the angles of huge pipes that meet at a junction situated slightly to the left of the photograph's centre. Immediately above this junction there is a semi-circular gantry or observation platform with railings – but no sign of people. A wide vertical of pipe emerges from above the observation platform and is itself topped with a smaller platform. A much narrower pipe pushes up from this point towards the top of the frame amidst a confusion of other spiky elements. The sections described here mask the upper part of the furnace itself. A smaller pipe that has branched off from the main left-hand angle of pipe lower down the structure passes to the left of the larger platform and rises towards the top edge of frame. The thin shoot of a pipe appears to be topped with a

small, square and rather perilous looking platform enclosed by thin railings. This is the culminating point of a flight of metal steps that lead up from the right-hand side of the structure. The steps skirt around the furnace and between it and an adjacent tower on the right and seem to bind the two structures together. This spindly skeleton tower, constructed from metal pillars, girders and angled braces, rises to a similar height to that of the furnace itself. The tower's corrugated pitched roof seems to attain for the structure it tops an almost medieval resonance, re-inventing itself as a lookout post for a nervous population. The already strange object of the blast furnace is made stranger through the manner of its cool and distant photographic rendering. Distracted reverie removes me momentarily from the dispassionate state of viewing the apparently neutral document in front of me demands. Towards the left-hand side of the photograph, the slightly bulbous base of the blast furnace is tentatively rooted to the shadowy ground and held down by the pull of the two huge, angled pipes, one on either side, that plunge into grey concrete. This inferred solidity instils no greater sense of permanence than that attributable to a fairground ride – the furnace, its pipes, towers, observation platforms and stairways may be dismantled piece by rusty metal piece – or, more fancifully, they might be imagined swept away by some natural or man-made catastrophe. As the photograph fluctuates between an unsettling sense of aftermath and premonition, it not only invokes a historical reading but, as the following discussion will show, one that is concerned with a particular military-industrial history.

Cut into a rudimentary elevated facade that briefly curtains the furnace and the spindly tower, at the same height as the semi-circular observation platform, are two rectangular apertures with an aspect ratio (albeit rotated ninety degrees) similar to that of the photograph itself. One aperture is to the left of the observation platform, its foreshortened form facing the left-hand edge of frame. The second is positioned within the front elevation of this thin surround, just to the left of the spindly tower, facing the viewer. This black hole is suggestive of a process of looking – and, as with the railed observation platforms, locates a distinct point from which to look. The face of a worker can be imagined, hidden within the tiny dark void, staring back at the photographers as they open and close the camera’s shutter. This point of ghostly looking, together with the constellation of observation platforms and steps, provides a loose structure on to which a narrative of sorts can be momentarily grafted. These are tangible sites of

human occupation even though the presence they imply is resolutely absent (this is not always the case in the Bechers' work – occasionally figures can be glimpsed, finely rendered in the minutiae of their photographs). My eye continues to navigate from platform to platform as if expecting some impromptu performance to occur.

Seen again, the flights of steps, particularly those that cling to the side of the spindly tower, invite further speculation of a human presence. As the steps turn down towards the base of the rickety structure a thin metal handrail is picked out, within a localised play of light, against a thin horizontal patch of shadow. This inconspicuous spot detains and returns the gaze, shooting out a restrained sort of *punctum* to this viewer. The curve of the handrail indicates both a way up and a way down, the small landing at this point offering a pivot point – a choice of precarious ascent or awkward descent. The steps, as delineated within the photograph, suggest the conditions of labour at this site: the to-and-fro of a worker's day – uncomfortable transit from one inhospitable space to another, exposed to heat, noise, dust, and weather. This point pivots too between the active and dormant states of the blast furnace – and between its past and future workings. The steps connote labour (the operation and management of the blast furnace and its industrial process) but absent of life, become a metaphor for passing time – history's present, past and future. Leading down from this point, the steps curve underneath the landing – creating, in conjunction with the protruding curve of the handrail itself, a sort of surrogate pulpit from which a workers' protest (within an imaginary, cinema-like, vision) could have been loudly orated. The material properties of the handrail are made tangible through the materiality of photographic reproduction. Viewing distilled through notions of memory and trauma yields up material concerns of labour and history. Considered in expressive but not irrelevant terms, the detail of the handrail produces a kind of nausea, causing a shock of time, making plain the existence of this very blast furnace before and beyond its photographic representation. The 'being in the world' of every aspect of its incongruous form is transmitted to the viewer through the fine material detail of the print – still evident in its reproduced form. The absent generations of workers are consequently brought into the world too. The steps, like the roots of a tree, ground the structure to which they are attached. They attest to passing time and history – connoting the achievement and exploitation of industry and industrial expansion, and possibly the criminality of war. The tiny patch

of mechanically reproduced photographic emulsion delineating this small section of handrail allows, in a Benjaminian sense, the past to speak in the present, the decades-old photographic mimicry of a blast furnace still vital for the future for how it might speak to the viewer of social concerns.[18] This imagining, whether lulled into operation by affect or shocked into action by what Barthes called punctum, brings the horror as well as the melancholy of the past into play. This would seem to run counter to the Bechers' conceived and applied methodology – to create objective records, as specimens, of structures soon to disappear (records tinged with the melancholy of regret at such impending absence). Thus, for the Bechers, their photograph of the Hainer Hütte blast furnace is about the *now* of its making, as act of preservation. In the photographed now (or past present) of the Hainer Hütte, absence was deferred to a future, a future now also past, the structure having long since been demolished. Such emphasis on the photographed now suggests an absence of history (or a closing down of history), but if studied long enough, the photograph's affect (however defined or manifest) works, with or without recourse to imagined narratives, to reinstate access to this strangely and stubbornly denied or obstructed past.

The irrefutable *thereness* of the Hainer Hütte blast furnace accentuates the absence felt immediately around it, within the confines of the two-dimensional space of the photograph. A dialectical conflict is therefore in play, within the photograph as image, between definitive presence and relative absence. The viewer may project a semblance of narrative on to the occupied centre of the photograph but equally that centre may exhaust or deny narrative and defer it to the surrounding void. The space that surrounds the coalesced centre of the photograph provides only the briefest of context, but it is

[18] The perils posed by blast furnaces as sites of labour are laid out in a lengthy and meticulously detailed report: *Occupational Hazards at Blast Furnace Plants and Accident Prevention: Based on records of accidents at blast furnaces in Pennsylvania in 1915* (Willcox, 1917). Dangers and resulting injuries and deaths are recorded and analysed with specific reference to sites and work activities within and around the structure of blast furnaces. The report (written contemporaneously with the early operation of the Hainer Hütte) can be interpreted in universal terms regarding the experience and risks of labour within such industrial facilities. Even within Willcox's objective and progressive account the worker is still often held responsible: "Falls down steps are largely due to carelessness" (Ibid., p.86). Willcox charts the number of working days lost to recovery from injury, as well as noting fatalities. Such a report, considered in historical terms, counts against the nostalgic view of industry often proposed in relation to the subjects of the Bechers' photographs. Coincidentally, the Bechers photographed several blast furnaces in Pennsylvania in the 1970s and 80s. Many mines feeding the industry were located in the neighbouring the state of New Jersey – its worked landscape central to much of Robert Smithson's work.

to this space that my gaze relocates. I notice that just over halfway up, on the right-hand side of the photograph, the gable end of a light industrial structure pushes in just a little from the edge of frame. Behind this hint of a building a narrow road leads up the fairly steep gradient of a hill, at the curved summit of which is a partially felled coppice of trees. Covering the distant slope of the lower part of the hill, is ground given over to what might (the mechanical halftone reproduction of the photograph obscures this detail) be allotments (Kleingärtensiedlung). These diversions into the distant peripheries of the frame, out in the zone (and stretching into the blind-field beyond the frame), are not as inconsequential as they may seem. The scrap of hilly landscape into which my eye has wandered belongs, as the caption to the photograph attests, to Siegen. Bernd Becher's place of birth. On maps of the town, simple research pinpoints the precise location of the former Hainer Hütte – and identifies too the true composition of the ground rising beyond the blast furnace. The photograph's softly delineated regimentation of distant landscape marks out not allotments, but the plots of a cemetery. A mental as well as visual shift, out to the edges and breaking the borders of the photograph's two-dimensional limits, has facilitated a connection with history – an affecting awareness of time. This in-the-present close looking, enacted over time, has extended and expanded the time of the thing photographed back into its past. History has leached slowly into the photograph.

The photographs that comprise *BANK* can be regarded through the prism of this extended study of the Becher photograph. This bringing into the light, out of history, lends emphasis to the process and sense of intent of my own practice – to make affect actively possible through the registered thereness of the thing photographed, as attempted through the committed gaze of extended looking enacted within photographic encounter. Rather than claiming a certainty of affect – affect may well remain elusive – this approach simply brings to the fore the process of looking, a process that this chapter enacts through application to researched real temporal as well as spatial place, as well as to the confined space and time of an individual Becher photograph.

The 'reality' of what the photograph of the Hainer Hütte shows cannot be gleaned simply through a reading of its content. This is true for all photography – as Brecht

noted – and is, of course, a limiting factor of the medium discussed by generations of theorists. The enacted slow reading of the Bechers' photograph demonstrates this obvious limitation. Only through recourse to further research is the historical and social significance of the Hainer Hütte made tangible. Regarding photography through the lens of new materialism calls out and addresses this contingency. The cursory research enlisted to establish tangible 'facts' regarding the Hainer Hütte and its history bears some equivalence to Perec's rudimentary listing of things seen from the vantage point of a Paris café. Considered as an attempt to gain further knowledge and understanding of the material significance of the blast furnace, within its wider spatial and temporal contexts, this application of description also, to some extent at least, mirrors Ingold's extending to beyond the limits of its branches, his account of the thing of a tree. It is in this spirit, within the extended writing on the Hainer Hütte that follows, that the blast furnace becomes a blast-furnace-in-the-air. History is in the air.

The close reading of the photograph confirms that its subject has a history that transcends its frozen photographic representation. This having of a history in itself produces the agency of affect. An implied but unknown or unspecified history, ingrained into the image through the material as well as visual nature of the photographic process – as was my intention with the photographs that comprise *BANK* – aligns affect with the uncanny. Becher photographs, through the strict order of their method in the present, seek to repel the emotional vagaries of the uncanny – but access to an affecting past is possible. Simple research into the Bechers' work demonstrates this.

**Memory of place**

Bernd Becher was born in Siegen in 1931. His formative work of the late 1950s, in drawing and painting as well as photography, depicted the Siegerland's industrial architecture. There is, then, a trace of romanticism to this early work, in terms of motivation if not style, that might equate, in its regard for the past, with a sense of nostalgia. Bernd Becher has commented on the origins of his work in relation to his childhood, as has the author of many introductions to publications of the Bechers'

work, Susanne Lange: "Close to his parent's home in Siegen was the Hainer Hütte steel mill, and his early childhood experience was accompanied by the smell of the blast furnace, while the plant complex was his daily playground" (Lange, 2007, p.11). This anomaly of personal experience suggests a conflict of interest, however temporary, between the neutrality of recording and the subjectivity of memory. The Bechers' work, considered in the context of memory, should include reflection on the content of their photographs viewed in relation to German industrial history, certainly that of the twentieth century. It is not possible to isolate the industrial past of Germany from the political and ideological forces that impacted so hugely upon its development and alignment with militarisation. To place the Hainer Hütte in context with this past, a brief account of its history is included here.

**Hainer Hütte and history**

In its more developed incarnation (iron production on the same site goes back to the thirteenth century) the Hainer Hütte blast furnace and steel mill was established in the mid-nineteenth century and its tall furnace, recognisable from the Bechers' photographs, was constructed in 1910. The furnace was fed by ore sourced from nearby mines (many of which were to be photographed by the Bechers several decades later). In an advertising document, the company that once owned the Hainer Hütte outlines the fluctuations in the operation and productivity of the blast furnace. It identifies the First World War as an event that led to its further expansion due to an increase in demand for pig iron (indirectly linked to the war). Production at the blast furnace, the same document states, then slowed following Germany's defeat and the ensuing economic crisis, brought about largely as a result of financial reparations demanded by the victorious allies. The French and Belgian military occupation, from 1923 to 1925, of the highly industrialised Ruhr district (Ruhrgebiet) to the north of Siegen was a humiliating event that further scarred the nation's psyche and led, by way of hyperinflation, to Hitler's rise to power. Preparation for war reinvigorated the Ruhr (and the industries of Krupp) and German industry as a whole. The Ruhr, it can be noted, would inevitably become a key site in the development of the Bechers'

oeuvre – and the site also of a notable interaction between them and the American artist Robert Smithson.

Nazi ideology impacted upon the landscape, industry and people of Bernd Becher's native Siegerland before and throughout the Second World War. Siegen was an area that included within its population members of a particular itinerant community, known as Jenisch (Opfermann, 2001, p.25-52). By the late 1930s members of the Jenisch community, then officially classified as gypsies, were driven off their smallholdings to make space for 'pure' German workers and their families. One might speculate here whether any of the workers moved in at the expense of Jenisch families were employees of the Haine Hütte or its Siegen-based parent company. The itinerant communities in the vicinity of Siegen inevitably continued to suffer persecution in the years that followed, with many of their number forcibly sterilised and sent to concentration and extermination camps (Ibid.).

Fundamental to any account of the history of German industry in the twentieth century must be the Nazi's extensive use of slave labour. The Hainer Hütte blast furnace was operated during the Second World War and after by Gontermann-Peipers AG. This Siegen-based company made use of slave labour within its workforce (either directly at the blast furnace or elsewhere in its chain of production that included steel rolling mills on neighbouring sites). Evidence verifies that large numbers of such labourers were worked by this company throughout the war.[19] The horror of this history has remained invisible within dominant accounts of the Bechers' photographs. However, as Chris Balaschak notes, some early critiques of their work in Germany did question their apparent prioritizing of aesthetics over social and political concerns and, by extension, did raise the spectre of the Nazi past (Balaschak, 2010, p.35). The Hainer Hütte and other industrial sites of Gontermann-Peipers AG were bombed during the war, resulting in the deaths of many slave-labourers (Siegen was bombed extensively during the war – with 80% of its buildings destroyed). Allied bombing on the night of

[19] See: [Online] *Zwangsarbeit im Siegerland 1939-1945* (2022), and [Online] *Aktives Gedenkbuch für die Opfer des Nationalsozialismus im Kreis Siegen-Wittgenstein* (2022).

16th December 1944 finally put the Hainer Hütte out of action for the remainder of the war.

The use of captions offers an obvious solution to Brecht's problem with photography – providing the "something set up" for which he called. Although not a major focus of this thesis, the use of captions in a critical capacity, to direct interpretation or provoke questioning of a photograph's content, is useful to consider. In *War Primer*, first published in 1955 in East Germany as *Kriegsfibel*, Brecht combines images with text for particular conceptual and political purpose. The book is comprised of a selection of photographs whose content relates directly or indirectly to the brutality of war. These images were taken from the pages of newspapers, their original captions removed and replaced with short poems. The purpose of the poems was to reveal further truths about what each photograph represents – enabling the sourced image to speak beyond its originally captioned content. Thus, the addition of this new text makes visible what may not have previously been 'seen' in the image. As well as offering ways to further revelation, the content of *War Primer* also serves as a critique of the medium of photography, its relation to power and its function presented within a journalistic context. The photograph on page thirty-six of a recent English language edition (Verso, 2017) shows a close-up view of the workings of a blast furnace (the order of images has been changed slightly within different editions published over the years). In the foreground bottom centre of the photograph (Fig. 4) are two Nazi officers in uniform. Both wear peaked caps connoting their authority and one has a rifle slung over his shoulder. The gaze of both officers is directed to their left, into the complex structure of the furnace and its pipework. The poem placed underneath this photograph reads as follows:

> Ten countries lie prostrate beneath my tread
> My own among them. And the bloody trace
> Left by my boot has turned the country red
> From Mulheim an der Ruhr to Kirkenaes.
>
> (Brecht, 2017, p.36 – translated by John Willett)

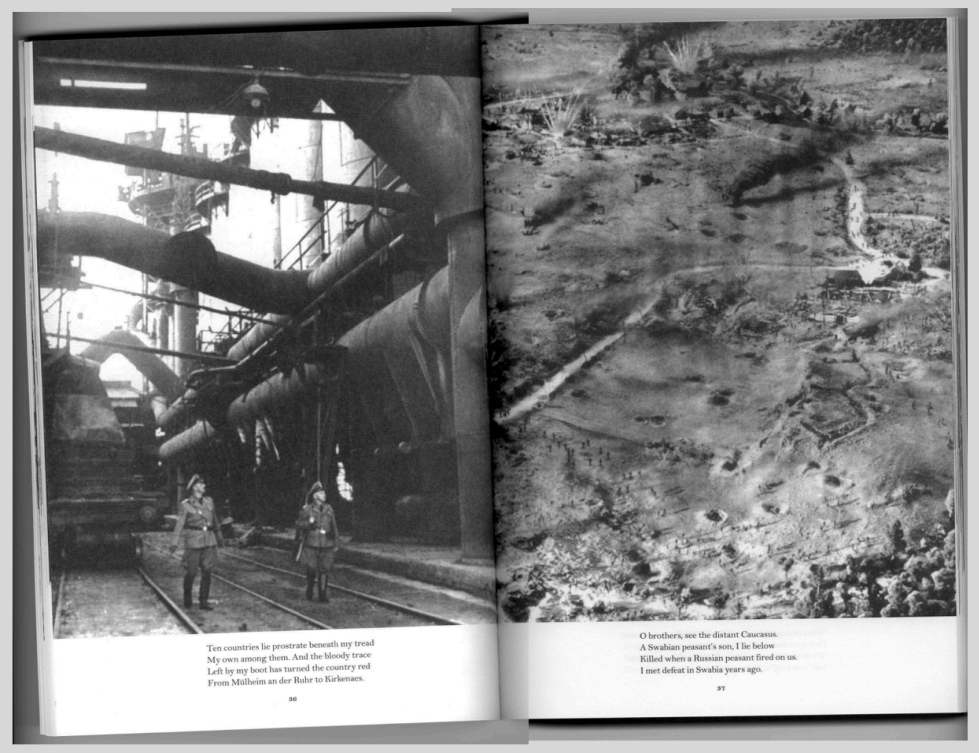


Fig. 4: Spread from *War Primer*, Bertolt Brecht, (Verso edition, 2017, pp.36-37).

These words encourage a reading that places the content of the photograph in context with the brutality of war and with the imperialistic intent of war regarding the taking of territory. In this edition of *War Primer,* the photograph of the blast furnace is paired with a photograph depicting a bombed landscape viewed from the air.

The industrial landscape of Mulheim an der Ruhr was photographed by Albert Renger-Patzsch in 1928. Renger-Patzsch, aligned with the Neue Sachlichkeit (New Objectivity) movement, was criticized by Benjamin for an overly aesthetic regard for his subjects (Benjamin, 1985, p.255).[20] However, Renger-Patzsch's collection of wide views juxtaposing urban and rural environments around Essen in the Ruhr Valley did speak of social concerns – evidencing poor living conditions of workers housed alongside polluting industry.[21] The *Zeche Rosenblumendelle* (Fig. 5) was the main industrial facility at Mulheim an der Ruhr, a city whose population during the Second

[20] Benjamin implies strong criticism of Renger-Patzsch's book of photographs *Die Welt ist schön* (*The World is Beautiful*) (1928).
[21] Renger-Patzsch's photographs of the Ruhr district were first published together in *Albert Renger-Patzsch Ruhrgebiet-Landscaften* 1927-35 (Wilde, J. and Weski, T., (eds), 1997, p.21)

World War would include large numbers of slave workers.[22] Later still, in 1967, industrial structures standing at this site would be photographed by Bernd and Hilla Becher. (Kirkenaes, incidentally, is a port towards the northern tip of Norway that was used as a staging post for the Nazi assault on the Soviet Union.)

Fig. 5: Albert Renger-Patzsch, *Landscape near Essen*, (*Landschaft bei Essen und Zeche "Rosenblumendelle*), black and white photograph, (1928).

Rather than showing a blast furnace at Mulheim an der Ruhr, the photograph in Brecht's *War Primer* instead shows a similar structure at Katowice, in annexed Poland. If the Bechers' photograph of the blast furnace at Siegen were to replace the published image (a switch justified by the Hainer Hütte's association with the use of slave labour during the Second World War), the effect would be the same. Brecht's poem serves to bypass the aesthetic and formal qualities of the Bechers' photograph, facilitating a deeper engagement with history. Despite the absence of military personnel, this text and image combination still speaks of the horrors of war.

[22] Details of the numbers and locations of slave workers in the Mulheim an der Ruhr area can be found here: [Online] *Standorte von Zwangsarbeitslagern in Mülheim* (2022).

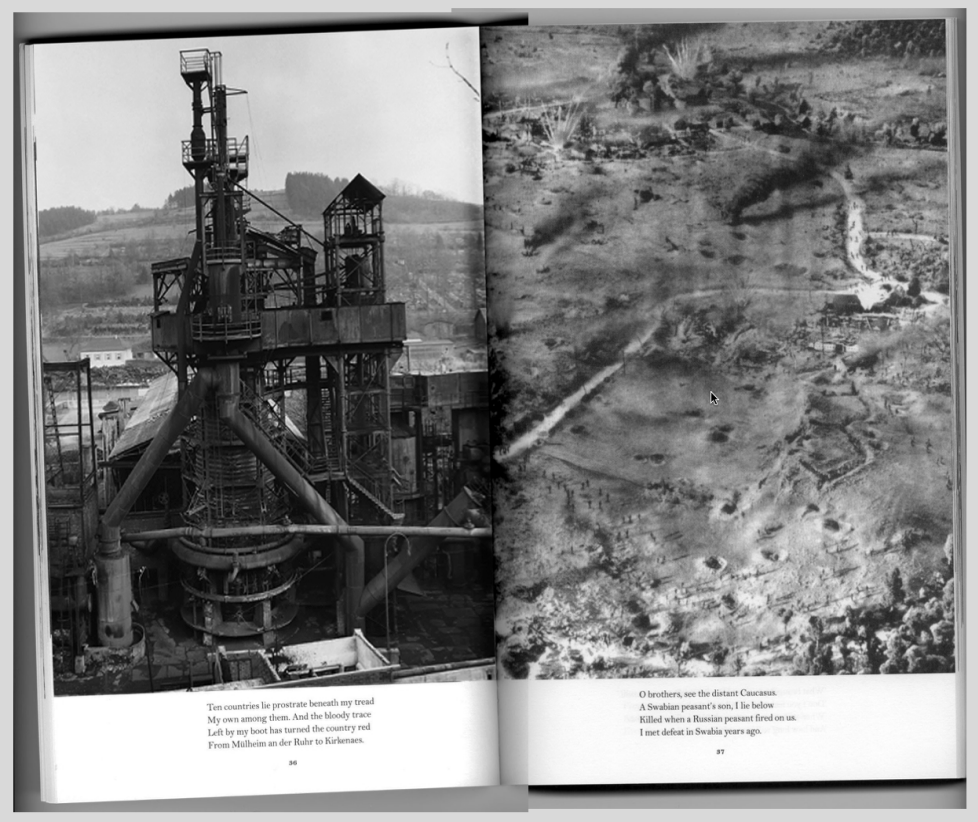


Fig. 6: *War Primer*, Bertolt Brecht, (Verso edition, 2017 pp.36-37), with intervention replacing the original photograph featured on the verso page with Bernd and Hilla Bechers' photograph; *Hainer Hütte, Siegen, Germany, 1961*.

In addition to Hainer Hütte, many other specimens of industrial architecture documented by the Bechers, including at sites across mainland Europe as well as in Germany, will have hosted slave labour during the Second World War. The Eisenhardter Tiefbau at Eisen, near Siegen, the first industrial structure that Bernd Becher ever photographed, on 35mm film, as visual reference for his work with painting and printmaking (Lange, in Becher and Becher, 2005, p.9), also made use of slave labour. It is this history that makes Lange's commentary on Bernd Becher's motivations seem disconnected from the reality of the past:

> Bernd Becher's parents' home in Siegen was not far from the Hainer Hütte steelworks, so he not only saw but also heard and smelled the operations that were performed there daily. That childhood familiarity with industry as part of everyday life was to remain with him throughout his life. (Ibid.)

Bernd Becher would have been eleven years old when the number of slave workers was at its height in Siegen (around 4000 – the population of the city was around 30000

at the time), deployed at industrial sites such as those operated by Gontermann-Peipers AG and housed in camps around the city. In Germany, under the Reich, the set of human relations reifying, in Brecht's terms, the idea of a factory, was in great part constituted by the material reality of slave labour. Slave labour, as largely forgotten or ignored history, persists as an invisible subject, equivalent to the conditions of labour more generally, Brecht sought to have illuminated photographically through one constructed means or another.

Specific legacies of the Second World War did provide the sense of urgency with which Bernd Becher pursued his cause. As again noted by Lange, Bernd Becher was aware that the formation of the European Economic Community (EEC) would lead to a rationalisation of industry in West Germany (Lange, 2007, p.12). Becher's response to this enforced closure of mines and steelworks and the like, that began after 1957, was to begin documenting the structures at these redundant industrial sites before their inevitable demolition. That the creation of the EEC (following on from the Treaty of Rome in 1951), in great part resulted from the outcome of the Second World War as an attempt, economic reasoning aside, to guarantee continued peace in Europe (between West Germany and France in particular), charged this diminution of the industrial landscape of Germany with particular historical significance. Thus, the legacy of war weighed heavily on the industry of Bernd Becher's hometown of Siegen – where his great life's work began. He (and Hilla Becher) did not photograph industrial sites as sites of trauma but these places, along with the structures imposed upon them, were (and remain) sites of trauma, nonetheless.

Whether any sense of history can be read in the Bechers' photograph of the Hainer Hütte blast furnace would depend (in line with Brecht's criticism of photography) on the manner and context in which that photograph is presented. It also must be acknowledged of course that the Bechers' did not set out to engage with industrial history in ways that connected this past to collective memory. They never presented their work in those terms and have stated that they had no direct interest in an archaeological approach to the past that might have unearthed such associations with history; "... with archaeology, you think of digging. We are not digging anything out ...", Hilla Becher has said (Ibid., p.214) It is also not surprising, given the Bechers'

stated interest in the finite nature of their industrial specimens, that discussion of memory within accounts of their work tends to focus on local recollections of such sites of industry – recollections voiced since the disappearance of the structures from the landscape. What continues to surprise is the rather melancholy tone in which the changing industrial landscape is often described in relation to the Bechers' work, usually without any reference being made to the larger (murderous) events of the twentieth century.

It is not unreasonable to wonder whether indeed the Bechers' approach to the subjects of their photographs, counter to any more nostalgic interpretation, was informed by their own knowledge of specific histories – such as the plight of the Jenisch community or the exploitation of slave labour. Bernd Becher's formative years as a child coincided with the Nazi era, placing him within the generation of Germans whose subsequent relationship with the relatively immediate past was difficult. His self-confessed deep fascination with local industry remains the formative childhood experience acknowledged as the catalyst for his work. It is also known that Becher collected postcards and old photographs, by recognised and anonymous photographers, of industrial sites around Siegen and elsewhere in Germany. His collection, which predates the beginnings of his work with photography, included images released from the archives of the giant Krupp works (Balaschak, 2010, p.37). This demonstrates his dual interest: in industry, and in photography employed as a means of recording – seemingly without critique. Hilla Becher, in a published interview, does place her thoughts about her work with Bernd in relation to history, and acknowledges the impact of the Nazi era on collective memory, saying: "… The war robbed us of the pleasure of looking at the past." This interview fails to develop this line of thought any further (Lange, 2007, p.207). Incidentally, the Hainer Hütte blast furnace closed within a year of the photograph being made and was demolished several years later – its history now established within the context of the Bechers' published and exhibited works.

Integral to the Bechers' practice was their display of photographs formed into grids as typologies – of types of industrial structures, such as water towers, or, indeed, blast furnaces. In their published books, the typological sequencing of photographs also

invites comparison – at the turn of a page. These strategies of arrangement, as articulated here by Blake Stimson, coerce the viewer to abstract the Bechers' photographs from the realities they individually depict:

> Unlike similar approaches used in botany or zoology, for example, the cumulative effect of the typological method as it is applied in the Bechers' life project does not provide greater knowledge of the processes or history of their subject. Instead, the use of rhythm and repetition endows the buildings they photograph with "anonymity" or abstract form they seek (by divorcing meaning from original purpose and everyday social function) rather than with scientific specificity and, in turn, allows us to read them ahistorically and extrasocially and appreciate them as autonomous aesthetic objects or "sculpture." (Stimson, 2006, p.149)

Stimson's concluding assessment of the typological method makes direct allusion to the title and organised content of the Bechers' first published volume, *Anonyme Skulpturen* (*Anonymous Sculptures*) (1970) (Fig. 7) – which includes the photograph of the Hainer Hütte blast furnace. Their use of this conceptually, rather than descriptively, pitched title enabled the Bechers' to align their photographic work with art – as Stimson remarks, acknowledging the contemporary ambition of their conceptual as well as aesthetic concerns (Stimson, 2006, p.149).

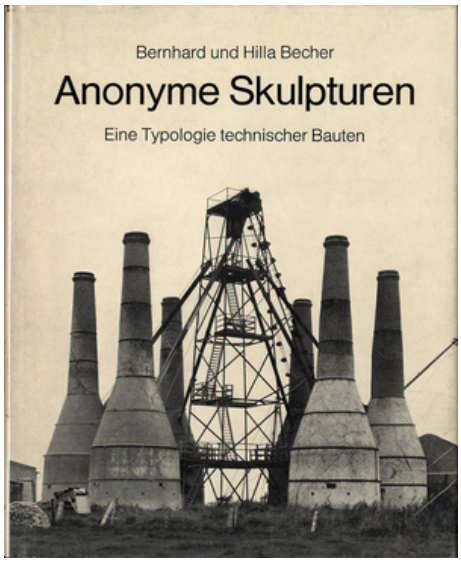


Fig. 7: Book cover: *Anonyme Skulpturen: Eine Typologie technischer Bauten*, Bernd and Hilla Becher, (1970)

This shift towards artistic form distances the Bechers' work from deeper social concerns, even if it does not remove it from a social context altogether. Despite the nuance and depth of Stimson's reflection on the Bechers' work considered in terms of its relation to history and society, his discussion deflects from the realities of war, foregrounding instead, for example, the photographers' quoted claims that both industry and their work are free of ideology (Ibid., pp.157-158). This approach serves Stimson's thesis placing the Bechers' oeuvre alongside two other photographic phenomena that marked out post-war society in the 1950s, namely Edward Steichen's *Family of Man* (1955) exhibition and Robert Frank's project *The Americans* (1958). Stimson viewed these happenings in photography as pivot points between the catastrophe of the recent past and the future. It seems odd in this context that the past is not, within Stimson's text, brought to bear with more weight on the intention and legacy of the Bechers' work. Stimson instead notes the photographers' "delight" (Ibid., p.158) in the industrial past. This delight, in its denial of ideological concerns, Stimson sees as key to their distinctive orientation and determination – which he provisionally aligns with the generally assumed attitude of their work and method located "midway "between distance and proximity"" (Ibid., p.143). This orientation and ""grammar"" of the Bechers' work is characterised by Stimson, within the project of his text, as their photographic comportment, their "bearing towards the world" (Ibid.). As much as he points to the relevance the Bechers' photography to contemporary society – he acknowledges, for example, that their representations of nomadic industrial form articulate aspects of local or national identity – he also situates their work in relation to notions of loss and nostalgia.

Stimson's reflection on the Bechers' work, on both its making and its reading, extends to performative and phenomenological aspects of looking. The subjectivity inherent to looking contributes too to Stimson's formulation of comportment. He places the experience of looking at a typology authored by the Bechers in contrast with that of viewing other examples of serial photography (those, for example, adopting photojournalistic or disjointed narrative forms).

> Working objectively against subjectivity, one comportment against the other and then back again, the Bechers' project finds the motor of its epic continuity in an elastic liminal bearing that bounds between a cool, mechanical, quasi-

> disembodied objectivity, on the one hand, and [...] a hot subjective comportment that speaks of its own history and desire in its bearing toward the world, on the other. (Ibid., pp.139-140)[23]

Such a process of looking (predicated on the movement required for the closer scrutiny that such comparative looking demands) can also create the conditions for affect. Of course, the dominant reading of a typology composed by the Bechers may concur with their intent towards emphasising the comparative forms of the structures photographed. This may be in terms of their sameness and difference, and in terms of what such sameness and difference might communicate about the development of industrial design in local, national and international contexts (and, even, how such evidence of 'progress' in design might be viewed scientifically in relation to notions of morphology etc.). This interpretation does not deny other readings of these collections of industrial specimens considered in relation to time and history. There is no doubt that intended readings of the Bechers' photographs, including within their arrangement as typologies, do also invite directly social readings – as might be expected given that industry is a social activity and is located within society, including within local communities (such as the town of Siegen, for example).

Stimson's approach is insightful and valuable to my own enquiry, particularly regarding its application of aspects of performance and phenomenology (implicated or invoked through movement) to interpretations of their work. Stimson's arguments, as above, place the Bechers' work in relation to modernism – the discussion of his book critiques their work from various viewpoints in relation to this context. Modernism is invoked in form of the modern nature and as aspiration of the emerging industrialized world. This is in part to align his critique with the Bechers' stated mission to document the surviving relics of nineteenth century industrial design – beginning with examples of German industry (initially around the town of Bernd Becher's birth). Any mention of such an industrialised society automatically becomes political, particularly regarding any account of its history. However, although Stimson's argument contains mention of the impact of progress on society, these references are couched in rather

[23] Aside from typological configurations, it is important to acknowledge that the Bechers did include within exhibition wider views of the industrial structures they photographed. They produced photographs of the Hainer Hütte that did establish such a context of landscape. However, it is perhaps true to say that such contextualising views are less commonly seen in exhibition or publication.

utopian terms (without critique of modernism's momentum of progress towards outcomes such as war and revolution, for example). I acknowledge the relationship to modernism of my photographs – those that comprise *BANK* – in terms of their appearance and the manner of their making: after all, the method of my photographing (and the visual results of this process) is reminiscent (as is much photography) of cubist ways of perceiving, seeing and representing. Movement within perception and within contemplation of the extent of matter and its flows, creates, in the context of my photography, a comportment (borrowing Stimson's term) combining the phenomenology of Bergson et al and theoretical positions of new materialism – such as Barad's *intra-action*, cited in Chapter One. My acknowledgement of expanded concepts of matter and of material relationships has informed my conceptual and psychological attempts to meet my subject half-way. Through the, ultimately, materially physical process – within which movement is key – of photographic encounter, at the base of Soane's wall, I have become an integral, though unfixed, element within the photographs I have made. My simple recognition of my own *vibrancy* (as, literally, manifest through my movement and its legacy within, and resulting from, the act of photography) among a plethora of material vibrancies, has contributed to a working comportment that is essentially new materialist, in terms of its theoretical ethos. The emphasis given to matter allows my assumed comportment to transcend the hierarchy of culture over nature on which modernism is premised. This is at least an argued rationale for the coming into being of the photographs that comprise *BANK*. Thinking photography as a comportment within which the photographer meets the thing to be photographed half-way has provided a useful way forward for the enquiry of this practice.

This notion of comportment, articulated with respect to new materialist concerns, can also be considered in relation to the content of the following coda that compliments the combined themes of this chapter. The formulation of comportment that might be conceived in this context invites extension from the Bechers themselves as photographers to myself – in my physical role as investigator, viewing the matter of their archived original photographic prints. A potential of affect, recognising the vibrancy of photographic matter, also comes into play within such a formulation. The physicality (within which, again, movement was key) of this related encounter –

manoeuvring the archive box, lifting mounts, removing tissue coverings – has furnished this coda with added material detail. The coda returns the text of the chapter from its basis in simple research, extended beyond the spatial and temporal limits of the Becher photograph, to the properties of materials of the object(s) directly under scrutiny.

## Coda

The coda to this chapter returns to thinking derived from new materialism. It is informed by the direct study of the physical, and therefore material, object of a Becher photograph, in its conserved print form, of the Hainer Hütte. The photograph, although taken in 1961, was printed in 1975. The print belongs to a portfolio edition of Becher photographs (Fig. 8) held by the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A), London – where it was viewed. The portfolio consists of fourteen prints and was "published in a numbered edition of 50 copies and 5 artist's proofs" by Schirmer/Mosel, Munich.

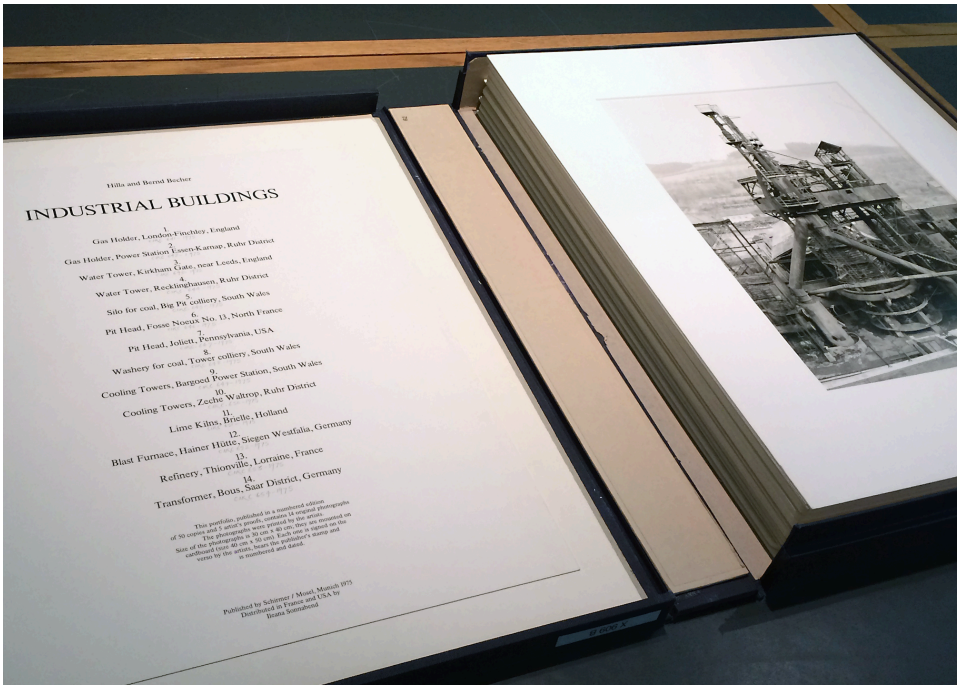


Fig. 8: *Industrial Buildings*, Bernd and Hilla Becher, portfolio edition of fourteen prints, Schirmer/Mosel, (1975), Victoria and Albert Museum, London. (Author's reference photograph)

Text authenticating the portfolio contents confirms that the photographs (dimensions 30cm x 40cm) were printed by the artists. Each print (adhered to card measuring 40cm x 50cm) is numbered and dated on the reverse side, also bearing the Bechers' signatures and the publisher's stamp. The date of the, in camera, making of the original photographs is not given. The editioned portfolio was published in 1975, the year of the New Topographics exhibition – that included ten Becher photographs. The Bechers' association, that this portfolio demonstrates, with an influential gallery (Ileanna Sonnabend), together with the inclusion of their work in a prominent exhibition of modern photography, indicates an alignment with contemporary art.

The portfolio was contained in an archival box, the prints encased within a stack of passe-partout mounts. The surface of each print was protected with a thin sheet of tissue paper. Each card backed print was housed in a two sections of thick museum board held in place, at the top, by two small strips of white cloth tape. The mount housing the Haine Hütte print was compromised at the right-hand corner, the tape having become detached – causing the print to slip its position in the assembly. The intimidating heavy weight and material nature of the portfolio box and contents – component parts of stacked mounts and their veiled contents – turned the encounter into an event. The necessary handling of the Hainer Hütte print, in its partially hinged passe-partout mount (Fig. 9), impacted in an affecting (emotional) way, on the viewing of the photograph. The nakedness of the print, as a physical and real thing, open to inspection, at very close quarters, without the usual protection and embellishment of glass and frame, proved revelatory. The fine detail evident within the enlarged print (its size just a little larger than the 10" x 8" negative from which it was made), immediately connoted technical precision, the complex form of the blast furnace delineated in a full range of tones – from near white to almost black. However, the technical excellence of the print, which in part was determined by precision exacted within the taking of the photograph, in camera, was, on viewing it as a thing, simultaneously countered by flaws in its surface. There is something reassuringly material about the nature of such imperfections. The print has evidently been glazed using a glazing drum or plate, a common process at the time, that has left tiny, pitted impressions, in its gloss surface. The high sheen of the print is also scuffed with scratches and signs of superficial abrasion. These faults are picked out in the harsh

glare of the V&A's study room's rather rudimentary lighting. Most material within this collection of marks populating the surface of the photograph (the analogue equivalent of digital 'artefacts') is a clearly defined thumb print impressed into the glaze. This directly indexical evidence, accentuating the indexical nature of the photograph itself, as an image and representation, is caught in the shiny gelatine coating of the print, half-way up the right-hand side – hovering over fine silver grain describing detail of a (wooden?) hut located on the gently rising hill behind the furnace. The position at the edge of the print of the thumbed impression reads as a trace of the print's manufacture – evidencing (most likely) the handling of the still hot print as it was removed from the heated metal glazing plate. There is also a less distinct fingerprint towards the bottom left-hand corner of the print, in the open space between the base of the furnace and a wide vertical pipe further to its left. Such traces of a human presence invite speculation as to the involuntary maker of these impressions: Bernd or Hilla Becher, or an assistant.

Fig. 9: *Blast Furnace, Hainer Hütte, Siegen, Germany, 1961*, Bernd and Hilla Becher (1961), black and white photograph, as in the *Industrial Buildings* portfolio. (Author's reference photograph)

Entering towards the top right-hand corner of frame and seen against the drab white sky is the thin branch of a tree – a detail ever-present in the photograph's reproduced form, as appearing in various books of the Becher's work. In the darkroom, no attempt

has evidently been made to 'dodge' out this remnant of nature. Scrutiny of the editioned print also reveals detail not easily read from the reduced size and resolution of its reproduction. In the shadow areas, the gradually receding light lingers in the interior spaces under and beyond the body of the furnace, revealing with increased definition, spaces of labour. The material properties of the naked and imperfect print act together to speak of history: of the blast furnace and the iron and brickwork that crumble around it, of the photograph itself – the processes of its taking, making and display. The print's accentuated detail allows easier entry into the depths of what it depicts – in front and behind the shell of the furnace itself. The light tones of the roof of the structure immediately to the rear of the furnace merge into the milky tones of the sloping landscape beyond. It is winter and the sky is clearly overcast (suiting the Bechers' method). On the right-hand side of the print, a path leading up the hill runs not between allotments (as was first thought) but between the ordered plots of a cemetery (which can be identified as the Lindenbergfriedhof – incidentally, on the same hillside, just out of frame on the right-hand side, is the Jüdischer Friedhof Lindenberg). Just in from the left-hand side of the print, a lorry is visible, front-on, apparently stationary, in a small open space. A car, side-on, is parked there too. Comparison with the same apparent photograph, sourced as a digital file from the Becher archive, reveals a discrepancy of significance beyond the contrasting qualities of tone. The lorry, newly discovered in the physical print (as in Fig. 10), is not seen in the Becher archive version (Fig. 1). The car parked side-on at the edge of frame is there, but the lorry is absent. The two versions must originate from two different negatives. The exact alignment of elements within the two reproductions indicates that the Bechers made both exposures within the same shoot, with their camera locked-off. A passage of time has elapsed between one exposure and the next – the loading of one dark slide and the next. The event of the lorry leaving or arriving has occurred at some point during the Bechers' operation of the camera at this spot. This discrepancy of detail brings further to the fore, albeit in a subtle way, the significance of time and history to the Bechers' work.

Fig. 10: *Blast Furnace, Hainer Hütte, Siegen, Germany, 1961*, Bernd and Hilla Becher (1961), black and white photograph – detail of print from the portfolio edition, showing lorry missing from the Bechers' archive reproduction (Fig. 1). (Reference photograph)

The original reading of this photograph included in this chapter describes its appearance in the book *Bernd and Hilla Becher: Basic Forms of Industrial Buildings* (2005, p.111). In that reproduction the lorry is there but had been missed – my reading evidently not close enough.

Close comparison (Fig. 11) also reveals the different crops applied to the various reproductions of this photograph around each of their four sides.

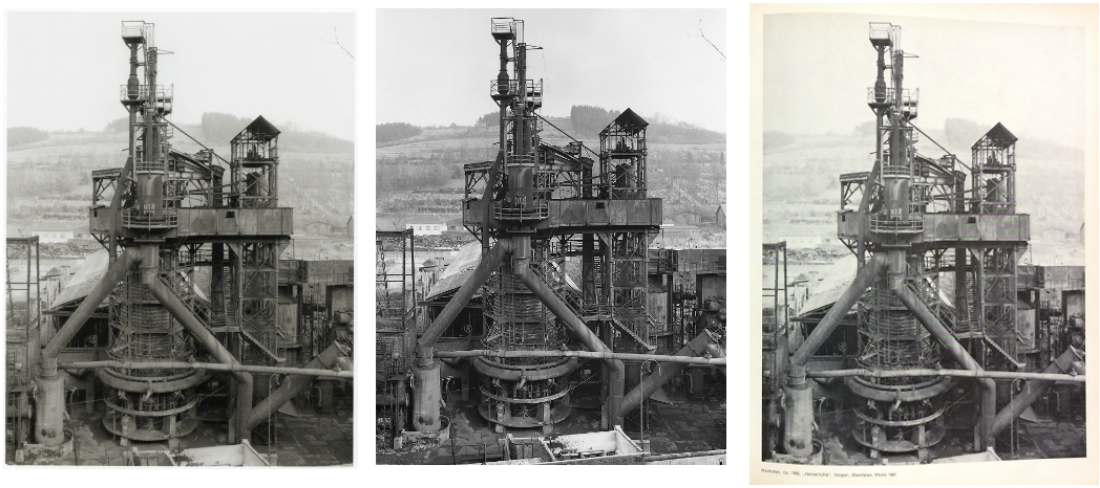

Fig. 11: Three reproductions of *Blast Furnace, Hainer Hütte, Siegen, Germany 1961*, showing different image crops, in:

Left: *Bernd and Hilla Becher: Basic Forms of Industrial Buildings* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2005).

Middle: Image file sourced from the Becher archive.

Right: *Anonyme Skulpturen* (German/English/French edition, Düsseldorf and New York: Art-Press and Wittenborn and Co., 1970).

For example, a wall that runs at an angle along the bottom of frame in the V&A print is cropped almost completely from the reproduction in *Basic Forms* (2005). The physical print of the Hainer Hütte also includes detail, denied on the printed page, at the left and right edges of frame. On the left, the full length of the horizontally parked car is seen, and on the right, more of the structure over which the thumb print is impressed, is seen. Such discrepancies of visible content further signify material concerns. The different existences and appearances of the print and its reproductions signal, in Ingoldian material terms, the status of a photograph itself, as a *photograph-in-the-air* – its precise determining elements unfixed and therefore in flux. Its reading can extend beyond the dimensional as well as temporal limits of what it shows. Time, the present and past of the photograph can attest, whilst weighing heavily on the material form of the Hainer Hütte itself, flows through its structure, further emphasizing its thingness as a *blast-furnace-in-the-air*. Although unknowable in all its particulars without recourse to research (research led by an identifying caption), what the photograph shows, approached slowly, read with a Baradian *response-ability* rather than distance, yields up, including through the material properties of the print's own thingness, something of the past and of history.

This chapter has applied a loosely interpreted new materialist expanded view of materiality to its reading of a single photograph authored by Bernd and Hilla Becher, and to its enquiry into the material properties pertaining to a *thing* (the blast furnace at Siegen). This regard for matter was initially pursued through a descriptive study of the recognisable content of the photograph itself. It is acknowledged that this reading was, in itself, at times interpretative, resorting to analogy and also, within its temporal concern for narrative, even fiction. This semblance of a literary approach aligns, in terms of the study's quest for affect, the subjective element of this methodology with the phenomenologically oriented subjectivity evident in the range of texts referenced in Chapter Two. Affect was also sought pragmatically, from the photograph and its expanded field stretching beyond the material limits of its reproduced form, through the catalysts of known or acquired common, anecdotal, and researched knowledge. This seeking, in terms of its intent, was neither innocent nor neutral. I, as the seeker, had a notion of what I might find or trigger – so, to some extent, the outcome was pre-determined. Nevertheless, this enquiry has illustrated the value towards understanding

of opening a photograph – and what it shows – through a process informed by close looking. Vague and inconsistent though its theory may be, new materialism's eclecticism of thought encourages a wider view. Consideration of Stimson's notion of comportment, as interpreted and related to strands of new materialist thinking, along with the material analysis and reflection of the concluding coda, returned the content of this chapter to concerns of matter – as ranged across nature and culture. The discourse of the chapter that follows, its varied themes considered in relation to the practice resulting from this study, illuminates further the positioning of the body of work that comprises *BANK* in relation to concerns of matter – as then discussed further in Chapter Five.

The focus of the next chapter, a particular work of Robert Smithson combining text and photographs, extends discussion of material and psychological concerns pertinent to photography conceived and enacted as a physical encounter. Manifestations of movement, including as previously addressed in the thesis discussion, come to the fore again – most literally in Smithson's first-person account of the act of photographing, moving within site and from one site to another. The chapter also further brings into play the operation of allegory and analogy – including as significant to the status of photography and photographic representation considered in relation to ruin (and the agency and affect of perceptible or inferred ruination). The aesthetic and conceptual significance of Smithson's application of photography to his wider practice – addressing nature/culture interactions of civilisation, perception, knowledge, matter and entropy – is encapsulated within the example studied. Discussion, of the manner of Smithson's enactment with photography, at site and within the resolution of the artwork's published form, also serves to further articulate and justify an expanded conception of the medium's essence – in line with the notion of comportment introduced within this chapter, and with the notion of ontology introduced towards the conclusion of the previous chapter. These two terms are brought further together within the remainder of the thesis and provide a framework within which to position the concluding responses to the essential concerns of this research study. This building of a conceptual and philosophical proposition of what photography is provides a continuity of enquiry that runs through and unites the entirety of the thesis and the work pursued and resolved within the practice.

## Chapter Four

## The Circling of History: The dynamics of storytelling in works by Robert Smithson and Walter Benjamin

This chapter explores concerns of objectivity (versus subjectivity) in ways both parallel to and at odds with Chapter Three's discussion centred on one photograph drawn from the Bechers' work. The focus here is on a single text and image artwork by Robert Smithson originally published as *The Monuments of Passaic* in the fine art journal *Artforum* (Vol.6, No.4, December 1967, pp.48-51).

The chapter is led by the illustrated written account Smithson constructs of a trip through the landscape of New Jersey, recalling his encounters with vestiges of industry. In contrast to the austere and resisting surface and form of the Bechers' photographs, agency and affect – expressed through metaphor, analogy and other literary devices – come quickly to the fore in Smithson's work. This study, including of Smithson's use of photography, emphasises material concerns that can be reconsidered in the context of new materialism – as well as materialisms more generally. That new materialism is a turn against postmodern and poststructuralist modes of thought and their binary opposite of modernism is relevant here given the challenge Smithson's art has represented to such interpretation and classification. The aesthetic concerns manifest within his work might align it naturally with modernism but Smithson's particular mixing of media and use of text constructed in itself *as* art bears an affinity to strategies of the postmodern (Owens, 1979, p.126). This positioning – between these two poles – represents, in photographic terms at least, a meeting halfway (in parallel, with Barad's conception merging nature and culture). The materiality of text, including its material properties on the page, is important to a consideration of Smithson's work viewed through the lens of new materialism. This aspect of the chapter's study aligns it with Chapter Two's concern for the matter of text – its focus, for example, on passages of Sartre's writing and its content. Literary concerns of narrative and analogy are relevant here too. In this regard, Smithson's work is also considered in the light of Walter Benjamin's thinking on the value to knowledge

of subjective experience, as explored through the study of a literary example relevant to the construction, recording and understanding of history.

Individual photographs illustrating Smithson's published *Artforum* work are studied with the aim of achieving at least some semblance of replication of the artist's own sense of encounter, at site, as experienced through the viewfinder of his camera (and as partially reconstructed through his written testimony of the tour). The importance of *movement* – as manifest in a variety of dynamic forms operating within the works of both Smithson and Benjamin – is identified and discussed, with respect to both image and text, in terms of its action and impact on the interpretation of meaning. A parallel is drawn in this regard between the narrative dynamics of Smithson's article and Benjamin's (1985) experimental text *One-Way Street*, originally published in 1928. Movement, as variously manifest, described and interpretated, is a key factor, the chapter argues, providing photography's something "*built up*" or "posed", as called for by Brecht and cited by Benjamin.

This study has informed the positioning, in formal, aesthetic, technical and conceptual terms, of my photographic work – as represented in the photographs that comprise *BANK* – between the substantially different, though evidently not unconnected, methodologies of the Bechers and Smithson. My cognisance of the manner of their individual working methods (considered within the wider scope of documentary and art practice), at site and with particular regard (both visually and conceptually) for matter, is ingrained in my photographs. Benjamin's ideas with regard to history, time and narrative and the image are a source that facilitates mediation, in terms of thought, between the work of the Bechers and Smithson and myself.

**Robert Smithson – his work and its material properties**

Although renowned as a land artist, through such epic earthworks as *Spiral Jetty* (1970), Smithson tested and explored a broad range of media, utilising them within a wide variety of forms and contexts. Robert Sobieszek, albeit in an appraisal concerned primarily with the use of photography, defines Smithson's art more generally as:

> ... a hybridization of pictures, concepts, photographs, and cinema as well as other mental and physical abstractions, a text that can be entered critically through any of the mediums he chose to work in or with, whether singularly or in conjunction with others. (Sobieszek, 1993, p.16)

The largely free and intuitive nature of Smithson's interweaving of distinct mediums and of their peculiar material properties and concerns – from re-worked land to sculpture in various additive and subtractive forms, to drawings, photography, film and texts – is relevant to this study. This relevance is due in part to the useful methodological contrasts provided by Smithson's work when compared to the essentially singular method employed by the Bechers.

**Smithson and the Bechers**

Such an apparently eclectic approach, even where it does employ photography, would seem to place the work of Smithson completely at odds with the settled methodology of the Bechers. However, Smithson's work does connect in direct physical terms to that of the Bechers. In December 1968, Bernd Becher took Smithson (along with gallery owner Konrad Fischer) on a tour around the industrial sites of Oberhausen (Lingwood, 2002, p.72). This location had been photographed extensively by the Bechers earlier in the decade – and would be again later. Smithson's meeting with Bernd Becher dates from after the publication of the *Passaic* work that is the subject of this chapter. However, the nature of the contact between these artists demonstrates the extent of their shared themes and subject matter – as is borne out in the work Smithson created in his response to his Oberhausen visit. Common to the work of the Bechers and Smithson are particularities of place, and particularities of physical orientation in relation to place, that can, as discussed in the previous chapter, activate concerns of history. Place, in the example of Smithson's *The Monuments of Passaic*, is the industrial wastelands around the town of Passaic, New Jersey. A similar focus on place – that surrounding and occupied by the Bank of England building in the City of London – was integral to the origination of the photographic and video work that constitutes the practice of my project. Particular streets served to mark out the limits of that place. This immediate physical geography determined the nature of my

engagement with both space and place – with pavement concrete and stone, and the hefty bulk of the Bank's architectural form. This chapter provides an account of Smithson's engagement with place – as pursued and presented by him within the form of a journey.

Movement, in time as well as place, implicit in the making of a journey is resolved at the conclusion of Smithson's artwork, conceived, conducted and recounted as a *tour*, in the motion of circling (as referenced in this title of this chapter). Circling, as informed by this study as a form and process of movement within the surveying of place, has been applied within my practice, within the choreography of my own photographic encounters. This chapter can be read through the filter of this concern for movement, including as implicated within new materialist conceptions of the flows of expanded matter. This account of Smithson's work thus further articulates a philosophical opening out of photography, and of a photograph – and what it is to take and make photographs and to view and understand them. In these terms, the chapter content also reinforces the value of the idea of comportment, as interpreted from Stimson and reapplied with specific intent within this study. The combined nature and culture of matter, as articulated, following new materialism's lead, within this thesis, including within this chapter, is absolutely significant to the expanded conception of photography this study proposes. Such a combining, in material terms, is encapsulated within the physical and psychological scope of comportment – signalling the value of this notion as a way of thinking photography.

### ***The Monuments of Passai*c (*Artforum*, 1967) – matter and memory**

Smithson's *The Monuments of Passaic*[24] article, as published in the pages of *Artforum*, (Fig. 12) is recognised as a text and image artwork. The siting of an artwork within a mass-produced paper-based medium is significant to this study's concern for matter – here constituted, definingly, in the material properties of the printed page. Text, in its

[24] The full text of this article is reproduced as *A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey* (1967), in *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, edited by Jack Flam (1996, pp.68-74). It is this published version of the text, otherwise identical to its appearance in *Artforum*, that is referenced in this thesis.

inky printed form, contributes to the material essence of the magazine layout built around coarse reproductions, one large and five of a smaller size, of Smithson's square, black and white photographs. The article's construction, within the white space of two double-page spreads, also comprised a small reproduction of an "allegorical" painting (not by Smithson) and a small section of map, printed in negative, cut down to a stepped shape of twenty-eight gridded blocks. This coming together of elements, in the material form of a magazine article, is an assemblage and as such equates to a form of montage (such as might be suggested by Benjamin in answer to Brecht's critique of photography).

The text of the article is Smithson's account of a journey undertaken, travelling initially from New York by bus, through post-industrial landscape along the Passaic River in New Jersey. The area through which Smithson toured bordered his hometown of Passaic and so offered some familiarity – as site or sites of memory. In this respect, the sense of connectedness, through childhood experience, between Smithson and the broad object of his encounter, mirrors Bernd Becher's emotional attachment to his hometown, gained through youthful forays around its industry. The similarly invoked or recalled formative experiences of these artists makes the study of this example of Smithson's work particularly pertinent – especially so given the subsequent contact between Smithson and Bernd Becher in the industrial heartland of Germany. The subjectivity of Smithson's text, sometimes overtly romantic in tone, provides a useful counter to the presumed distanced objectivity exuded by the Bechers' photographs – and their captions.

THE MONUMENTS OF PASSAIC

Has Passaic replaced Rome as the eternal city?

ROBERT SMITHSON

*He laughed softly. 'I know. There's no way out. Not through the Barrier. Maybe that isn't what I want, after all. But this — this —' He stared at the Monument. 'It seems all wrong sometimes. I just can't explain it. It's the whole city. It makes me feel haywire. Then I get these flashes —'*
—Henry Kuttner, *Jesting Pilot*

*. . . today our unsophisticated cameras record in their own way our hastily assembled and painted world.*
—Vladimir Nabokov, *Invitation to a Beheading*

On Saturday, September 30, 1967, I went to the Port Authority Building on 41st Street and 8th Avenue. I bought a copy of the *New York Times* and a Signet paperback called *Earthworks* by Brain W. Aldiss. Next I went to ticket booth 21 and purchased a one-way ticket to Passaic. After that I went up to the upper bus level (platform 173) and boarded the number 30 bus of the Inter-City Transportation Co.

I sat down and opened the *Times*. I glanced over the art section: a "Collectors', Critics', Curators' Choice" at A.M. Sachs Gallery (a letter I got in the mail that morning invited me "to play the game before the show closes October 4th"), Walter Schatzki was selling "Prints, Drawings, Watercolors" at "33⅓% off," Elinor Jenkins, the "Romantic Realist," was showing at Barzansky Galleries, XVIII — XIX Century English Furniture on sale at Parke-Bernet, "New Directions in German Graphics" at Goethe House, and on page 29 was John Canaday's column. He was writing on *Themes and the Usual Variations*. I looked at a blurry reproduction of Samuel F. B. Morse's *Allegorical Landscape* at the top of Canaday's column; the sky was a subtle newsprint grey, and the clouds resembled sensitive stains of sweat reminiscent of a famous Yugoslav watercolorist whose name I have forgotten. A little statue with right arm held high faced a pond (or was it the sea?). "Gothic" buildings in the allegory had a faded look, while an unnecessary tree (or was it a cloud of smoke?) seemed to puff up on the left side of the landscape. Canaday referred to the picture as "standing confidently along with other allegorical representatives of the arts, sciences, and high ideals that universities foster." My eyes stumbled over the newsprint, over such headlines as "Seasonal Upswing," "A Shuffle Service," and "Moving a 1,000 Pound Sculpture Can Be a Fine Work of Art, Too." Other gems of Canaday's dazzled my mind as I passed through Secaucus. "Realistic waxworks of raw meat beset by vermin," (Paul Thek), "Mr. Bush and his colleagues are wasting their time," (Jack Bush), "a book, an apple on a saucer, a rumpled cloth," (Thyra Davidson). Outside the bus window a Howard Johnson's Motor Lodge flew by — a symphony in orange and blue. On page 31 in Big Letters: THE EMERGING POLICE STATE IN AMERICA SPY GOVERNMENT. "In this book you will learn . . . what an Infinity Transmitter is."

The bus turned off Highway 3, down Orient Way in Rutherford.

I read the blurbs and skimmed through *Earthworks*. The first sentence read, "The dead man drifted along in the breeze." It seemed the book was about a soil shortage, and the *Earthworks* referred to the manufacture of artificial soil. The sky over Rutherford was a clear cobalt blue, a perfect Indian summer day, but the sky in *Earthworks* was a "great black and brown shield on which moisture gleamed."

The bus passed over the first monument. I pulled the buzzer-cord and got off at the corner of Union Avenue and River Drive. The monument was a bridge over the Passaic River that con-

*Art: Themes and the Usual Variations*

"Allegorical Landscape" by Samuel F. B. Morse, displayed at Marlborough-Gerson Gallery

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Fig. 12: *The Monuments of Passaic*, Robert Smithson, *Artforum* (Vol.6, No.4, December 1967), p.48.

Smithson constructs his article as a narrative through mental and physical terrain within which the familiar coexists with the unfamiliar. His very visual descriptions of place, space and things, often relayed as premonitions of photographs, thus themselves *become* images. Smithson's embodied and highly subjective musings on the expanded spatial and temporal natures of what he sees, and imagines, are placed alongside reproductions of 'real' photographs taken on the trip. In one sense Smithson's article can be read, collectively, as an account of the coming into being, or the resolving, of an image: an image that re–presents landscape and place directly, and which, in so doing, invokes memory – both cultural and personal – and the widest span of history. The personal here is embodied in the physicality and ranging mind of the traveller himself, his bodily and mental experience of place provoking responses that veer towards and into abstraction and the imaginary. Through recourse to metaphor and allegory, Smithson conjures from the legacy of the industrial past a disparate collection of ideas that reflect on the nature of civilized and uncivilized place, in and out of time.

My own experience of place is undoubtedly prejudiced by my knowing selection of the peculiarly significant social and cultural – as well as architectural – subject that is the Bank of England. The significance of this institution and building had been

absorbed and recognised by myself, as enquirer, through little more than assumed knowledge and supposition. My interest, effected in the present and through recall to memory, clashed my cynicism and loathing of state capital and global finance with my acquired fascination for particularities of historical and modern architectural form – particularly as represented in the often-melancholy form of the surviving structures designed by Sir John Soane (the nature of Soane's architecture is placed in further context with my practice in Chapter Five). Thus, the basis of my bearing towards my subject is formed from elements of personal experience, memory and tendency towards obsession regarding place and the thing (to be) photographed. In this respect my regard for, and intention toward, that which I photograph, conforms with equivalent factors motivating the work of the Bechers, as recounted in the previous chapter, and Smithson. Such innate prejudices are of course commonly ingrained within artworks – photography included – however transparent or otherwise this prejudice may appear.

Allegory in particular, through this chapter's reflection on its operation within Smithson's use of photography, has informed the outcome of my practice. As imbued conceptually and visually within Smithson's regard for his subject, such allegorical allusions echo forms of allegory that unite much of the discussion of this thesis and its attendant practice. Generated through, for example, allusion to ruin, allegory becomes a residue held within my individual photographs. Allegory in these terms is an agential potential to be activated – by a viewer's close regard of individual photographs, and by the same viewer's extended regard for photographs juxtaposed or aligned within *BANK*'s serial forms. Allegory is instilled in the practice in alignment with its application, or acknowledgement, within methodologies of thought applied, as variously referenced in this thesis, within new materialism. The distillation of ideas, drawn from different theoretical approaches to photography and from a variety of philosophical disciplines and positions, has driven the practice resulting from this study and informed the intent of the *BANK* photographs, both individually and cumulatively, to activate the agency of history and its affect.

Smithson’s progress through the "monuments" that populate the landscape of Passaic is textually constructed as a journey – a journey knowingly recounted in an essentially

linear way through the considered combining of words and photographs. Presented within the pages of *Artforum*, Smithson's account can be viewed as a particularly crafted exercise in storytelling – the story of his tour and of its denouement, in a public park, in the "model desert" of a children's sand box. In his essay *The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov*[25] (Benjamin, 1973, pp.83-109), Benjamin considers the craft of storytelling in the context of history and compares the methodologies of the *writer* of history (the historian) and the *teller* of history (the chronicler). Within his consideration of these dual forms Benjamin favours the value of interpretation over explanation, critically pronouncing that: "The historian is bound to explain in one way or another the happenings with which he deals..." (Ibid., p.96). This poverty of explanation Benjamin contrasts with the interpretative approach of the chronicler, who, he says, "…lifted from the burden of demonstrable explanation from their own shoulders." (Ibid.) The place of such demonstratable explanation, Benjamin says, "is taken by interpretation, which is not concerned with an accurate concatenation of definite events, but with the way these are embedded in the great inscrutable course of the world." (Ibid.) This comparison is useful to consider here if equated with the conflicting positions of objective and subjective photographic seeing and recording. Benjamin's faith in the teller of stories, the chronicler, to reveal the nature of the inscrutable might also signal an answer to Brecht's conundrum regarding the photographing of the A.E.G. or the Krupp works. The storyteller's method, as Benjamin describes it, is one of construction – the chronicler's account is built with, or through, interpretation, within the act of which something is set up. Such a process of fabrication would meet the approval of Brecht who, according to Benjamin, demanded a similar intervention into observable reality from his imaginary photographer. The process of fabrication in turn highlights the importance of *movement* within the creation of understanding (movement within thought, within the interpretative process, allows the chronicler to break the linear continuum of history) and returns this chapter to Smithson and his use of photography.

[25] Nikolai Leskov (1831-1895) was a noted Russian writer of novels and short stories, plays and journalism. His novella, *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District* (1865), was adapted as an opera by Dmitri Shostakovich (1934). Benjamin's essay was originally published in 1936.

The layered process of Smithson's endeavour, evident in the content and construction of his text (as a narrative) and in his taking of the photographs, mirrors the progress of his original journey through Passaic. The temporal, mental and physical dynamics of process, thus emphasised within his writing, become integral to the interpretation of the article as artwork. Precisely through its constituted material form, as montage or assemblage, achieved and constructed through overtly subjective process, Smithson's *Passaic* article, as a text and image work, lays a claim to *truth* – a truth perhaps truer, thanks to its strongly personal orientation, than that which could have resulted from objective straight reporting.

**The beginning of the tour described**

Smithson introduces the *Passaic* text with two quotes, one voicing a character trapped in a city disturbed by a vision of a monument, the other positing the relation of the camera's eye to the constructed real. Smithson then begins the journey: "On Saturday, September 30, 1967, I went to the Port Authority Building on 41st Street and 8th Avenue" (Smithson, 1996, p.68). His account continues in similarly descriptive vein:

> I bought a copy of the *New York Times* and a Signet paperback called *Earthworks* by Brian W. Aldiss. Next I went to ticket booth 21 and purchased a one-way ticket to Passaic. (Ibid., p.68)

The particularity with which each small event of the tour and its progress is recounted lends the text an objective tone that is clearly intentional and significant in terms of its reading. Smithson's embarkation, his embarkation on the writing of the text itself as well as on the physical journey, also signals the dynamic of the tour – as journey – by indicating that there is to be no return. This simple statement of intent, through its limit and its implied linearity and sense of finality, may influence the reader's interpretation of the subsequent text and the status of its accompanying images, in terms of their purpose and their location in relation to time and memory. Such dynamics foreground Smithson's movement – on the bus and through landscape. As the tour progresses, mediated through Smithson's matter-of-fact recounting, *movement* becomes increasingly significant as the catalyst that sparks the tourist's (and narrator's) claimed

comprehension of sight and site. Indeed, within one such fluid moment of encounter (between artist, landscape and sun – recalled later in this chapter), Smithson seems to experience an almost literal *light* of understanding. Initially however, at the commencement of the tour, movement, although perhaps no less significant, is arguably more prosaic – manifest in the forward momentum of Smithson himself seated on the bus. The means and temporal essence of travel is thus established. From the beginning, this is a time-based work – time measured and experienced through movement. Movement is of interest here in terms of its significance to materialisms – whether historical (of various conceptions) or new – and to what movement reveals about matter and its agency.

Smithson's experience of his tour begins on the bus and develops in the 'real time' of the journey, during which he reads from a newspaper and a book. Smithson, through the material of language, responds to the content of the newspaper in the now of the bus trip but briefly invokes a (not so distant) past, in the form of a recently received letter, thus skewing, albeit briefly, his account in time. From the outset, Smithson's commentary thus creates a series of temporal layers of experience that are sustained throughout the duration of the tour. The newspaper article that quickly becomes the focus of Smithson's attention is an art column that features, significantly – it would seem – for the tour itself, a "pre-modern" allegorical landscape painting.[26] Smithson here, through his surprisingly detailed description of the newsprint reproduction of the painting, secretes another layer of time and of suggested interpretation into his text. His attention then flits from the article to assorted newspaper headlines and to glimpses of the world passing by: "Outside the bus window a Howard Johnson's Motor Lodge flew by – a symphony in orange and blue." In this brief impression of something seen through the transparent glass screen of a bus window, Smithson switches his text from bland representational description to fluid abstraction.

[26] This painting is by Samuel F. B. Morse, the inventor of Morse Code, and was completed in 1836. Within the *Passaic* text, the painting is captioned as an "Allegorical Landscape". Its full title is *Landscape composition: Helicon and Aganippe (allegorical landscape of New York University)*. The allegory of the painting concerns the idea of knowledge, as represented by the institution depicted.

Having invoked one alternative landscape in the form of a painting, Smithson then alludes to another: the setting for *Earthworks* (Aldiss, 1965). Smithson skims the pages of Aldiss's novel in a rather cursory way, quoting the first sentence and another apparently chanced-upon line. In so doing, Smithson creates layers of landscape co-existing in time and within immediate experience in a variety of forms, both pre-imagined and real. These initial romantic, fictional and experiential encounters with landscape pre-empt and pre-figure the landscape of Passaic itself. Such premonition is created through movement – the physical movement of the bus and the fleeting movement of Smithson's stream of thoughts and impressions (as a mentally active but bodily confined passenger).

Smithson, writing from the viewpoint of a peculiarly sentient passenger, establishes the physical status of the first monument he encounters by first highlighting the movement of the bus on which he had been seated. The monument is a bridge, crossing the Passaic River, over which the bus has just passed. Movement is thus integral to Smithson's mental process of recognition (realised within encounter) of bridge *as* monument. Movement is integral too, to the traveller's subsequent description and interpretation of this assigned monument. Manifestations of movement that operate, within Smithson's physical confrontation with this and each subsequent monument encountered, include those of his own body and of his gaze. In turn, his gaze triggers an abstract movement in time as he considers each attributed monument – in terms of its material properties and those of its surroundings – both historically and geologically. The language of the text, often framed in allegorical terms, further shifts Smithson's relation to time and to the real.

The occurrence and particularity of movement, existing in zones both temporal and spatial, is outlined here to emphasize the process of seeing, describing, imagining and interpreting that is essential to Smithson's text and image construction. Smithson's tour is a journey on which the representational and the abstract are collided through particular allusions to movement – as suggested above. Movement, considered most broadly in the context of Smithson's *tour*, can simply be identified as the basic constituent of the journey itself. Smithson, in his enactment of the journey, emphasizes his movement through the space of the landscape along the Passaic River, transiting

from monument to monument. In so doing, he constructs a horizontal linearity (including mention of several roads and highways – Highway 3, River Drive and Central Avenue, etcetera) that he counters through pointed allusions to the vertical linearity of time – through words such as "monument", "ruin" and "infinity". Ann Reynolds suggests, interpreting Smithson's notes on the tour, that his journey from *urban* New York to *suburban* New Jersey takes him: "to the edge of the temporal, where one's unconscious acceptance of temporal and perceptual experience as external and spatial [such acceptance being deemed applicable to travel within an urban centre] is shattered" (Reynolds, 2003, p.107). Smithson sums up this conflict between space and time in this note from the same source: "Any reference to 'space' involves an appeal to realism, time as a cinematized abstraction, on the other hand dematerializes the limits of travel, and detaches one from sensations of movement or the need for destinations" (Smithson, in Ibid.). Smithson's reference to movement, albeit his desensitisation to it, signals the importance of its dynamic within the reading of his work – including the reading of his photographs. A useful detour can be made here to other writings of Benjamin and their material nature. Of relevance is the significance of various manifestations and dynamics of movement within the reasoning and articulation of the writer's ideas.[27]

**Smithson, Walter Benjamin and the dynamic of movement**

Movement, as significant within Benjamin's thought and writing can illuminate further how its manifestation, whether *real* or abstract, facilitates the creation of meaning in Smithson's illustrated text. Implicated alongside movement in the creation of meaning is *distance*. The process of finding the right physical and mental distance relies on movement. The sense of movement is articulated in many of Benjamin's writings and attains a particular conceptual significance and status in terms of meaning.[28] *One-Way Street*[29] is certainly one such work, and one whose fragmented form parallels that of

[27] Howard Caygill discusses manifestations, in Benjamin's writing and ideas, of movement, *experience* and language. (Caygill, 1998)
[28] Movement is key to Benjamin's famous image, in *On the Concept of History* (*Über den Begriff der Geschichte*, 1940), of an angel driven, faced with the catastrophes of history, towards the future to which his back is turned. See: (Löwy, 2005).
[29] Originally published as *Einbahnstraße* (1928).

Smithson's *Passaic* article in certain respects. The fifty-nine pages of *One-Way Street* are comprised of blocks of text of greatly varying lengths, written in response to sixty individual headings. Benjamin's writing is thus a physical as well as conceptual construct, creating the idea of a street from a collection of disparate texts, each of which might be interpreted as a shop or landmark lining a route. Viewed in this way the comparison with Smithson's text is clear. The interpretation of both relies on movement and its process of unravelling. The two works briefly coincide in the foregrounding of the form of the tour: Smithson's tour of Passaic echoed by Benjamin's 'Tour of German Inflation', the subtitle to a lengthy fourteen-part entry in *One-Way Street*, headed 'Imperial Panorama' (Benjamin, 1985, p.54).

Benjamin's text brings together in particular relationship a collection of *Denkbild*, or thought-images. The process of coding and de-coding these thought-images relies on movement – movement within thought created through the illumination of one thing or idea through particular allusion to another. The texts are thus constructed to emphasise the process of thought – often through recourse to allegory – so that process becomes integral to meaning. Esther Leslie (1998) considers Benjamin's concern for process in relation to craft and the learnt and often highly specialised manual work of the artisan. Such concerns for craft, as Leslie points out (Ibid., p.7), is the catalyst for much of Benjamin's writing – in essays such as *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility* (various drafts 1935-8)[30], which considers the social and political implications of art transmuted from its foundation in the skills of the individual to an industrialised form. Craft is thus considered as a social phenomenon in which skill is acquired and passed on from person to person and from place to place. This movement of people and skills on which the sustenance of craft relies emphasises process – wherein the process of practise is informed by the process of knowledge. Process here is also a synonym for experience – the experience of the itinerant artisan that builds and extends knowledge. In exploring the themes of Benjamin's essay, Leslie reminds us that the root of the German word for experience, *Erfahrung*, comes

[30] Benjamin's influential and enduring essay went through several drafts, its title variously translated – more commonly as *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (Benjamin, 1973, pp.219-253). The formulation included above here is as translated by Leslie.

from the word for travel, *fahren*, making the point that artisans have “experience of the world and a world of experience” (Ibid., p.5).

The real and abstract nature of movement – as manifest within the creation and continuity of skills and craft practices in the ways discussed above – can be transposed directly onto Smithson’s text through his projected experience of travel and his articulated form of the journey. This may seem a tenuous comparison, but such consideration of process – linked to craft, experience and the itinerant practice of the storyteller (as in the Benjaminian concerns discussed by Leslie (Ibid.)), founded on movement – signals the value of constructed subjective approaches directed towards the creation of knowledge and understanding. In this way, Benjamin's literary and conceptual method runs parallel to Brecht's something "built-up".

**Smithson – at the first monument on the tour**

At the site of the first monument encountered, a bridge over the Passaic River, Smithson engages with his subject through the lens of a camera and through direct experience of an imaginary photograph.

> Noon-day sunshine cinema-ized the site, turning the bridge and the river into an over-sized *picture*. Photographing it with my Instamatic 400 was like photographing a photograph. The sun became a monstrous light-bulb that projected a detached series of “stills” through my Instamatic into my eye. When I walked on the bridge, it was as though I was walking on an enormous photograph that was made of wood and steel, and underneath the river existed as an enormous movie film that showed nothing but a continuous blank. (Smithson, in Flam, 1996, p.70)

Smithson’s account, if considered in relation to Benjamin’s *storyteller*, is offered with the free spirit of the chronicler rather than the compulsion to explain of the historian. His text suggests a particular kind of pre-visualisation – a recognition that the world exists as image without further re-presentation. The forces, and movements, of nature take prominence over the technical intervention of the camera. It is light of the most pure and powerful kind, the light of the sun, (an 'essence' of life and of photography) that illuminates the site and its monument, imbuing it with the glow of a projected

cinema image. The landscape itself becomes a vast projection screen reflecting the image back into Smithson's eyes. The light bounces into his Instamatic triggering, as if automatically, a series of "detached" stills. Stillness and movement exist simultaneously in this vision that Smithson has constructed, or which has simply *appeared* to him; the three-dimensional photograph of the bridge framing the visually unresolved flow of time below. Interpreted directly in relation to photography, Smithson's textual conjuring of image through travelogue seems to acknowledge the medium's shortcomings regarding its pretentions towards objectivity. The uncontrollable nature of his vision and the phenomena that bursts forth within it declares in a flash that objective recording is simply not achievable through photography. The psychological and hallucinatory nature of his account, expressing the potentially overwhelming effect of attempting to comprehend and contain the world as experienced through the device of the camera, underlines photography's inescapable subjectivity. The disorienting effect inherent to the act of photography suggests that actual reality cannot be objectively rationalised within the reality as the photographer perceives or experiences it. Neither can the *real* be reconciled with the reality registered on the film (or sensor) at the back of the camera. This unsettling realisation is paralleled in Smithson's brief account of the emotional impact of a visit to a camera store: "I am overcome by enervation. The sight of rows of equipment fills me with lassitude and longing. Lenses, light meters, filters, screens, boxes of film, projectors, tripods, and all the rest of it makes me feel faint" (Ibid., p.372). The latent potential of this stuff of photography only seems to emphasise the futility of trying to replicate the world through photography – pointing up the unavoidable discrepancy between the real and mechanically imaged reality. A camera, Smithson suggests, bleakly confronting photography with geological time, "is an entropic machine for recording gradual loss of light" (Ibid., p.373). Meanwhile, light both orientates and disorientates vision, and is the ultimate disorientating matter of photographic media, registering illusions of reality in the stillness of the photograph and the motion of cinema.

The photograph (within Fig. 13, and Fig. 14), reproduced in a larger size than the other five included within the *Artforum* spreads, is captioned: *The Bridge Monument Showing Wooden Sidewalks. (Photo Robert Smithson)*. Not quite in keeping with

Smithson's florid account of his encounter with this first monument, his photograph instead has a sense of considered, balanced even, formality to its composition. This serves to organise and make sense of what it shows.

nected Bergen County with Passaic County. Noonday sunshine cinema-ized the site, turning the bridge and the river into an over-exposed *picture*. Photographing it with my Instamatic 400 was like photographing a photograph. The sun became a monstrous light-bulb that projected a detached series of "stills" through my Instamatic into my eye. When I walked on the bridge, it was as though I was walking on an enormous photograph that was made of wood and steel, and underneath the river existed as an enormous movie film that showed nothing but a continuous blank.

The steel road that passed over the water was in part an open grating flanked by wooden sidewalks, held up by a heavy set of beams, while above, a ramshackle network hung in the air. A rusty sign glared in the sharp atmosphere, making it hard to read. A date flashed in the sunshine . . . 1899 . . . No . . . 1896 . . . maybe (at the bottom of the rust and glare was the name Dean & Westbrook Contractors, N.Y.). I was completely controlled by the Instamatic (or what the rationalists call a camera). The glassy air of New Jersey defined the structural parts of the monument as I took snapshot after snapshot. A barge seemed fixed to the surface of the water as it came toward the bridge, and caused the bridge-keeper to close the gates. From the banks of Passaic I watched the bridge rotate on a central axis in order to allow an inert rectangular shape to pass with its unknown cargo. The Passaic (West) end of the bridge rotated south, while the Rutherford (East) end of the bridge rotated north; such rotations suggested the limited movements of an outmoded world. "North" and "South" hung over the static river in a bi-polar manner. One could refer to this bridge as the "Monument of Dislocated Directions."

Along the Passaic River banks were many minor monuments such as concrete abutments that supported the shoulders of a new highway in the process of being built. River Drive was in part bulldozed and in part intact. It was hard to tell the new highway from the old road; they were both confounded into a unitary chaos. Since it was Saturday, many machines were not working, and this caused them to resemble prehistoric creatures trapped in the mud, or, better, extinct machines—mechanical dinosaurs stripped of their skin. On the edge of this prehistoric Machine Age were pre- and post-World War II suburban houses. The houses mirrored themselves into colorlessness. A group of children were throwing rocks at each other near a ditch. "From now on you're not going to come to our hide-out. And I mean it!" said a little blonde girl who had been hit with a rock.

As I walked north along what was left of River Drive, I saw a monument in the middle of the river — it was a pumping derrick with a long pipe attached to it. The pipe was supported in part by a set of pontoons, while the rest of it extended about three blocks along the river bank till it disappeared into the earth. One could hear

49 *The Bridge Monument Showing Wooden Sidewalks.* (Photo: Robert Smithson)

Fig. 13: *The Monuments of Passaic*, Robert Smithson, in *Artforum* (Vol.6, No.4, December 1967), p.49.

Fig 14. *The Bridge Monument Showing Wooden Sidewalks,* as published in: *The Monuments of Passaic*, Robert Smithson, *Artforum* (Vol.6, No.4, December 1967), p.49.

In recounting this experience of his physical and very material encounter with the bridge "monument", Smithson writes: "I was completely controlled by the Instamatic (or what the rationalists call a camera). The glassy air of New Jersey defined the structural parts of the monument as I took snapshot after snapshot." (Ibid., p.70)[31] In fact, the contact sheets from his tour indicate that he took thirteen photographs of the bridge and its near vicinity. Some exposures depict, in upward viewpoints, cropped portions of the ironwork of the bridge, while in others, Smithson's viewpoint is turned downwards, towards the bridge pontoons and the river. The complete form of the bridge fits into the frame of one photograph, the descriptive potential of which is undermined by the silhouetting of its content against the sky. The first photograph in the sequence is an inadvertent firing of the camera with the lens partially obscured, perhaps by a finger, and the final photograph shows the bridge in the distance – Smithson having covered further ground on his tour (Sobieszek, 1993, pp.90-91).[32]

Writing on Smithson's various works in and around New Jersey, Reynolds makes the following observation of this particular photograph:

> Although Smithson has gone to some trouble to construct this and other perspectival images in his photographs, he is left with two-dimensional images of a convention for describing pictorial space that describes little or nothing about Passaic, other than the fact that it can be represented as such a space and passed through. (Reynolds, 2003, pp.109-110)

The rather prosaic descriptive outcome of Smithson's photographic method, Reynolds suggests, "is precisely his point" (Ibid., p.110). Thus, the expectations of photographic recording and the humdrum nature of the depicted subjects are routinely confirmed. Reynolds describes Smithson's photographs as "either conventional or nondescript",

[31] As part of the research of this thesis and project, the content and appearance of this photograph has been described applying the methodology of close reading introduced in Chapter One. This text is located within the Appendix (see p.191). Counter to the high subjectivity of Smithson's recalled experience of making the photograph, the method and process of this reading is employed with the intention of achieving, in a Benjaminian sense, a certain distance (involved but simultaneously distant). This distance is accomplished through the accentuated time-based processes of looking, and of transcribing – within which mental observations are formed into written text. In this sense, this descriptive approach fits well with the photograph's matter-of-fact caption.

[32] The caption to this spread in Sobieszek's book, *Robert Smithson: Photo Works* (1993), indicates that Smithson shot seven rolls of film, comprising eighty frames, on his tour.

judging that their main characteristic is that they "resemble other images" (Ibid.). Part of their resemblance is based precisely in their adherence to photographic norms regarding perspective. This following of convention is perhaps odd given Smithson's interest, within other areas of his practice, in what he considers the illusion of perspective. Such illusionistic qualities are the particular subject of exploration in a number of his gallery-based sculptural works. *Pointless Vanishing Point* (1968), photographic records of which exist as important works, or artefacts, in their own right, is perhaps the most pertinent example. The blocked form of others, such as *Alogon* (1966) and *Plunge* (1966), also bears a strong visual relationship to the arrangement of content in Smithson's *Bridge Monument* photograph. In these works, Smithson plays with the viewer's perception of perspective, creating illusionistic accounts of form receding away from vision. This confounding of perspective, or rebuttal of its supposed laws, is seemingly contradicted in Smithson's two-dimensional representation of three-dimensional form in the *Bridge Monument* photograph, produced just a year later. Smithson also critiques human perception of perspective within a short essay titled, like his sculpture, *Pointless Vanishing Points*, dating from the same year (1967) in which he undertook his Passaic tour. His concern, expressed in terms directly analogous to photography, is how perception creates a false sense of space: "The dual globes that constitute our eyes are the generators of our sense of the third dimension. Each eyeball contains a retina that functions like a photographic plate inside a spheroid camera" (Smithson, in Flam, 1996, p.358). Smithson maintains that our camera eyes "perceive through a mental artifice of directions without determined distances, which in turn gives the illusion of infinite spaces" (Ibid.). It is the illusion of three dimensions created by binocular vision, in the "*camera obscura* of perception", that Smithson's sculpture *Enantiomorphic Chambers* critiques:

> An awareness of perspective comes into one's mind when one begins to deal directly with the physiological factors of sight as "a thing-in-itself." In other words, all of one's attention must be focused on the *camera obscura* of perception as a physical *thing* or *object*, and then translated into a three-dimensional illusion, so that one is left with a *non-thing* or a *non-object*. (Ibid., p.359)

Smithson here refers to the perspectival illusion of sight itself, as constructed in the mind and as enacted within the seeing, light receiving, eye. His judgement is that the

eye's translation of the thing seen, distorted by its interpretation of perspective, into a three-dimensional illusion, results in something other than the thing itself. Such lack of faith in perspective in terms of its accuracy measured in relation to experience highlights Smithson's caution regarding spatial concerns – leading him to prioritise *time* over *space*. "As with surveyor's space, something stands between perception and its object", Reynolds observes, drawing on text from Smithson's notebook version of the *Passaic* article – which she quotes thus: "Indiscrete sensations are felt in place of any simultaneity between perception and the *thing* perceived, 'space' therefore should be avoided when establishing the limits of time travel" (Reynolds, 2003, pp.103-4).

**Movement and distance – Smithson and Benjamin**

Crucial to the defining but malleable methodology Smithson employed on his tour was his own physical and conceptual engagement with the features of Passaic's landscape and the monuments he identified – upon encountered site. Movement and distance, through Smithson's foregrounding of experience and his embodiment of the photographic process, came into play within his activation or signalling of thought – and within his creation of what are essentially thought-images. These specific mechanics of mediation and of interpretation constituted a process within which Smithson operated directly and overtly in relation to his subject. Sight and interpretation considered as process is addressed by Benjamin is his essay on the value of storytelling, as he variously interprets the form. He is led by his studies of early chroniclers and of originators of the form of the novel. His argument is ultimately one pitched against the modern forms of written and broadcast communication that had eclipsed this essentially ancient medium. What Benjamin held as sacred to the story had been all but destroyed by modernity's basis in information and explanation.

> Every morning brings us the news of the globe, and yet we are poor in noteworthy stories. This is because no event any longer comes to us without already being shot through with explanation. In other words, by now almost nothing that happens benefits storytelling; almost everything benefits information. Actually, it is half the art of storytelling to keep a story free from explanation as one reproduces it. (Benjamin, 1973, p.89)

The demise of the story and the processes that fed it was for Benjamin a legacy of an increasingly dangerous authoritarian civilization – and in many ways this is the real topic of his essay. Benjamin saw the interpretative processes at play within storytelling as an experiential and humanising counter to the closed certainties of modern communication and proposed such processes as a defence against an increasingly dehumanising world.

Gerhard Richter's (in Richter, 2007, pp.43-71) analysis of Benjamin's *One-Way Street* seeks to identify the conceptual and formal linguistic elements that are key to the text's construction and reading. Richter's discussion centres on the notion of distance and the effect of distance on the construction and functioning of the text. In this critical reflection on Benjamin's conceptual and methodological approach, Richter looks for precedents in the writer's works that might provide insight. In the process of so doing, he positions Benjamin's essay *The Storyteller* – in terms of its ideas and the form and content of its text – between the concise *One-Way Street* and the extensive and expansive later work, *The Arcades Project* (written between 1927-1940)[33] (two works whose distinct forms were devised precisely to create distance between the content and subject of the text and the reader). Richter's analysis of *One-Way Street* fixes on Benjamin's abstract notions of *distance* (*rechten Abstand*) and *angle-of-view* (*richtigen Blickwinkel*). He traces the discursive ideas Benjamin built around these notions back to what he identifies as their origins in *The Storyteller*. He then projects them forwards – to their implementation within the construction of *The Arcades Project*. Thus, Richter establishes the centrality of distance and angle-of-view to Benjamin's thinking during the period in which he worked on these three formally disparate but clearly not unrelated texts. Of particular interest to Richter is how Benjamin applied distance and angle-of-view to the process of interpretation. For Benjamin the dynamics of such interpretation, as fashioned within the work of the storyteller (or chronicler), were essential to the transcendence of lazy and malevolent explanation – such as define dominant linear accounts of history. Through the process of finding the right distance and angle-of-view, Benjamin's evocation of the storyteller promotes thought (Richter, 2007, pp.57-58).

[33] *The Arcades Project* (2002) was in an incomplete state at the time of Benjamin's death in 1940. It was first published, edited by Rolf Tiedemann, as *Das Passagen-Werk*, in 1982.

In *The Storyteller*, Benjamin explores the distance of the storyteller from the audience – and the distance the storyteller creates in the story.

> Viewed from a certain distance, the great, simple outlines which define the storyteller stand out in him, or rather, they become visible in him, just as in a rock a human head or an animal's body may appear to an observer at the proper distance and angle of vision. (Benjamin, 1973, p.83)

Richter asserts that Benjamin is advocating distance achieved through re-presentation (just as he presents Leskov *as* a storyteller). Through such presentation as "something else", distance and the potential for understanding that distance creates is increased. Benjamin is proposing, Richter goes on to suggest, that understanding of the truth of an idea, or an object, is created by presenting the idea or object as something, in the process of being distanced, moving "…en route away from us" (Richter, 2007, p.58). This "procedure", Richter concludes, "asks that we remain close to the presented object or idea by departing from it" (Ibid.).

Considered in these terms, the interpretation of the storyteller is achieved – as is essential to its process – through movement; the movement that occurs precisely during the achievement of distance. This sense of movement, however abstract, might usefully be considered in relation to the movement that is in play within Robert Smithson's methodologies – as employed within his conceptual and physical tour of the landscape of Passaic. For Smithson, the process of understanding relied in crucial part on the distance of photography – the distance created through photography, through the colliding of the inherently imprecise nature of the medium with its mechanical reproducibility. Smithson created or enacted distance through the act or action of photography, through his process of recording interpretation, with body, mind, eye and camera. Smithson can thus be described as a chronicler of Passaic, rather than as its historian.

It is interesting to note that Richter (Ibid., p.69), within his extended analysis of Benjamin's *One-Way Street*, chooses to dissect a thought-image (of 162 words) – entitled 'Technical Aid' – that features a pointed reference to photography. Benjamin's opening lines place the photograph in relation to truth and to thought:

> Nothing is more miserable than a truth expressed as it was thought. Committed to writing in such a case, it is not even a bad photograph. And the truth refuses (like a child or a woman who does not love us), facing the lens of writing while we crouch under the black cloth, to keep still and look amiable. (Benjamin, 1985, p.95)

"For Benjamin, then", Richter says:

> ... truth, at least the truth that is expressed in textual phenomena such as writing and images, can only become what it is as an aberration from itself. The truth of the truth is one that, in its expression, departs from any mimetic model. This kind of truth resists us, will never fully yield to us. It is something that is on its way to becoming something else – that is becoming an aberration. For Benjamin, such an aberration is what writing felicitously sets into motion. (Richter, 2007, p.70)

Richter expresses the sense of movement he perceives in his appraisals of Benjamin's texts in phrases and words such as "en-route", "departing" and "aberration from itself". Similar dynamics of motion are inherent to many of Robert Smithson's works – including within his writing.

Smithson describes his encounter with the landscape of Passaic and in doing so creates various visual allusions to time fixed within the man-made nature of the landscape and the structures that adorn it, or that lie partially buried beneath its surface. The sights within site that Smithson highlights he then attributes as monuments. There is a contrast here between the movement and flux he observes within, or at, site and the assumed rigid fixity that the word "monument" suggests.

Taken it its entirety the *Passaic* article might be read as an extended or multi-faceted thought-image. The combination of matter-of-fact description and imaginative speculation invites particular interpretations of Smithson's text and of the monuments he constructs or assigns from word and image. The whole can be viewed as a giant photograph – a massive snapshot representing the subjective experience of place. The text is an articulation of the act of looking and a reflection on seeing. Somewhere in the process of looking and seeing the monuments that populate this landscape are brought into being. In the instant of their creation, at the culminating point of their photographic and textual imagining, sparks the thought image that invokes history.

Thought is provoked by movement – the motion of a bus, the projection of sunlight, the flow of the river, the rotation of a bridge, the route of a road, the throwing of rocks, the rattling and gushing of water, the spurting of "infernal fountains". Smithson himself moves within a landscape that he describes, referencing an early photographic process, as a picture that is itself moving:

> Actually, the landscape was no landscape, but "a particular kind of heliotypy" (Nabokov)[34], a kind of self-destroying postcard world of failed immortality and oppressive grandeur. I had been wandering in a moving picture that I couldn't quite picture…

and:

> … That which is not seen in this landscape also moves: yet to be built buildings rise into invisible "anti-romantic" ruin, their construction envisaged in the flow of "discredited" time. (Smithson, in Flam, 1996, p.72)

This momentary stasis in Smithson's journey is populated by the "holes" of Passaic and the promised "Utopia" of a car showroom, evoked as a vision of latent movement (Ibid.).

From here Smithson descends to a "a new territory" which he questions in relation to time. Here movement has slowed to a barely perceptible slippage: "Perhaps I had slipped into a lower stage of futurity – did I leave the real future behind in order to advance into a false future?" Smithson concludes that he has, and that "Reality" was now behind him on his "suburban Odyssey" (Ibid.). Smithson has now reached the "center" but finds it is "no center". It is instead "an abyss" where movement has been sucked into an "ordinary void" (Ibid.). Here he has lunch in a diner – named *Golden Coach*, suggesting a magical possibility for flight. Instead of fleeing he reloads his Instamatic camera, still committed to his odyssey and still open to further pre-existing photographs. The colour of the box of Kodak film is the colour of a golden coach and signals an alternative means of escape. Smithson is out in the world of Passaic once more, a world that he finds increasingly hard to pin down. Everything is shifting now. The ground has become a cardboard map that threatens to give way under his feet. He

[34] This reference to the author Vladimir Nabokov relates to a line (Nabokov, 2010, p.51) within his novel *Invitation to a Beheading* originally published in 1936.

considers whether he might be on another planet altogether. “Time”, muses Smithson, “turns metaphors into *things*, and stacks them up in cold rooms, or places them in the celestial playgrounds of the suburbs” (Ibid., p.74). Smithson, invoking and applying allegorical interpretation, speculates on the status of Passaic, first as an eternal ruin and then, perhaps swapping the notion of the eternal for the infinite, as a mirrored city in an endless line of other larger and smaller mirrored cities. The imaginary, towards the conclusion of Smithson’s monologue, gives way to the real – a children's sand box, located in a desolate park somewhere in or near the town of Passaic itself.

Smithson's photograph of what he designates as *The Sand-Box Monument (also called The Desert)* is included within his article (Fig. 15).[35]

Fig. 15: *The Sand-Box Monument (also called The Desert)*, as published in: *The Monuments of Passaic*, Robert Smithson, *Artforum* (Vol.6, No.4, December 1967), p.51.

[35] As for Fig. 14, the content and appearance of this photograph, Fig. 15, has been described applying the methodology of close reading introduced in Chapter One. This text is located within the Appendix (see p.193). This text serves to counter the allegorical nature of Smithson's written response to this photograph discussed in this chapter.

**The sand box as metaphor and allegory**

In the text of Smithson's article, "the sand box" is alternatively ascribed as a "model desert" – thus shifting the real, as photographed (and as described above), back into the realm of the imaginary. The contrast between the banal photograph and the allegorical interpretation of Smithson's words is, as has been previously stated, precisely Smithson's point. The effect of (free) subjective interpretation clashed with mechanical photographic description allows Smithson to evoke, at the end point of his journey, a vision of an entropic monument: as a metaphor built on sand:

> This monument of minute particles blazed under a bleakly glowing sun, and suggested the sullen dissolution of entire continents, the drying up of oceans – no longer were there green forests and high mountains – all that existed were millions of grains of sand, a vast deposit of bones and stones pulverized into dust. (Ibid., p.74)

Smithson describes each grain of sand as a "dead metaphor that equalled timelessness…" and imagines the sand box as an open grave. He then imagines the living circling the dead in a speculative experiment in time travel spun out in the concluding passage of his text.

> Picture in your mind's eye the sand box divided in half with black sand on one side and white sand on the other. We take a child and have him run hundreds of times clockwise in the box until the sand gets mixed and begins to turn grey; after that we have him run anti-clockwise but the result will not be a restoration of the original division but a greater degree of greyness and an increase of entropy. (Ibid.)

Smithson's imaginary experiment and the metaphorical and allegorical interpretation he has applied to it, has ended his tour of Passaic in a flurry of movement that goes nowhere.[36] He mirrors the rotation of the child, forwards and backwards, with the movement of movie film, in camera and then projector, in an attempt to turn back time.

[36] Smithson's notion of entropy in allegorical terms loosely interprets the second law of thermodynamics. The image conjured, of white and black sand mixed into an irreversible grey, mirrors German physicist Rudolf Clausius's example of the mixing of hot and cold water, illustrating the inevitable result, of the transfers of energy, as an entropic cooling to a settled state. Roger Caillois, a French intellectual whose interests linked science, sociology, philosophy and surrealism (through his contact with André Bréton in the 1930s), founded much of his thinking on Clausius's interpretation and visualisation of the second law of thermodynamics. Yves-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss (1996)

> Of course if we filmed such an experiment we could prove the reversibility of eternity by showing the film backwards, but then sooner or later the film itself would crumble or get lost and enter the state of irreversibility. Somehow this suggests that the cinema offers an illusive or temporary escape from physical dissolution. (Ibid.)

Smithson's premonition of ruin projected onto the flow of film itself has finally and fatally dissolved movement into dust. Movement has become spectral and irresistibly entropic. The sand box event that Smithson has us picture in our mind's eye constitutes, considered in Benjamin's terms, a thought-image. As the eye follows the imaginary child and the metaphor of entropy his movement creates, Smithson achieves in his text a certain distance and angle of view – moving away from that which the photograph itself suggests – that facilitates the attachment of thought to image. In his analysis of Benjamin's *One-Way Street*, Richter translates part of a letter Benjamin wrote to Hugo von Hofmannsthal:[37]

> Precisely in terms of its eccentric aspects, the book is, if not a trophy, nonetheless a document of an internal struggle. Its subject matter may be expressed as follows: to grasp timeliness as the reverse of the eternal in history and to make an impression of this, the side of the medallion hidden from view. (Richter, 2007, p.50)

The essentially circular image that Benjamin conjures here is at least faintly reminiscent of Robert Smithson's sand box and shares some of its spatial and temporal characteristics. The medallion's double-sided form is composed of faces of light and dark: the side that glows in the tainted light of a false history and the reverse side that offers the promise of revelation out of darkness. As a visual device, or metaphor, the medallion's facing and reverse sides equate with the two halves of Smithson's sand box, equally demarcated between light and dark. Richter considers the relation of Benjamin's writing to the two sides of the medallion he describes:

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explore entropic thinking in examples of contemporary art in part through a comparison of Caillois's and Smithson's ideas. The second law of thermodynamics is premised on closed systems of energy. Smithson's overriding interest in entropy, in terms of how he applies the notion within his work, is in the dissipation of energy as manifest within the largest of known systems – the universe.

[37] The Austrian writer Hugo von Hofmannsthal was influential in a wide area of Austrian and German culture, through essays, novels, poetry, plays and opera libretti.

> His sentences work to make visible the connection between, on the one hand, what is immediate and topical and, on the other, the larger invisible structures of historical cognition. (Ibid.)

Richter identifies, in Benjamin's writing, a dialectic operating between two sides – one visible and the other not. As in Smithson's work, movement or motion and the oppositional forces such animation generates, facilitates revelation. Benjamin's grasp for timeliness is a violent movement that must, if only for an instant, turn back time – a phenomenon metaphorically envisioned within the literal turning of his imaginary medallion. In the reading of *One-Way Street* it is the (back and forth) movement generated within the text itself that momentarily turns the face of the metaphorical medallion, allowing the impression of now to be struck. Even though their relation to time, history and knowledge are dynamically different, Benjamin's medallion and Smithson's sand box each represents a thought-image that illuminates, through the conflict of linear and circular forces, the condition of the present.

Benjamin's imagined medallion, with its two opposing faces, transposes easily onto the idea of the dialectical image. Movement is the driver of the dialectic, as represented in Smithson by the circling of the child, and in Benjamin, by the emphatic asserting of the medallion's reverse face. Conversely for Benjamin, true revelation, in which the past illuminates the present, occurs at a moment of stillness within movement.

> It is not, that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past; rather, image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. In other words, image is dialectics at a standstill. For while the relation of the present to the past is purely temporal, the relation of what-has-been to now is dialectical: not temporal in nature but figural. (Benjamin, 2002, p.463)

The temporal fluctuations of thought and image in Benjamin's text (the use of the word *figural* (*bildlich*) emphasises image, rather than language) fit the conceptual dynamics at play within Smithson's imagined sand box. To signal the futility, in attempting to restore order, of reversing the movement of the child, Smithson creates a parallel metaphor swapping the movement of the child for the movement of projected film. The film is projected first forwards and then backwards. Whilst film run in reverse might give the temporary illusion of turning back time and reassembling the

appearance of the past, its project in this regard, Smithson points out, is simultaneously undermined by its material nature – it is doomed to fade, become hopelessly scratched and ultimately disintegrate. It might be noted that the nitrate film of Benjamin's day was (and still is) at risk of total ruin through combustion – prone to burst suddenly into flames.

Smithson, through conferring the status of monumentality on his subject, emphasises the position of the sand box in relation to time. Smithson's hopeless metaphor of the sand box is constructed as a stark demonstration of the irreversible and unredeemable nature of time and cruelly spirals human time within geological time. The forces pushing and pulling at time within Smithson's metaphor provoke an awakening that equates with the sort of coming together in constellation that triggers the momentarily illuminating "dialectics at a standstill", if interpreted in Benjamin's terms. Smithson's image flashes brightly. The impossibility of reforming the order of things through the reversing of time is expressed in Smithson's image through the dynamics of circling. Smithson is in effect circling history. Such circular motion and the ultimately doomed entropic energy its constant movement signifies, finds its echo in many of Benjamin's thought images.

**Smithson, entropy, the sand box and the slag of Oberhausen**

The allegorical entropic vision triggered by the sand box monument, connects, in approximate visual terms, Smithson's image of suburban Passaic to the series of photographs he produced at Oberhausen in Germany. This set of photographs, *Nonsite (Slag), Oberhausen, Germany* (1968), sixty frames derived from five rolls of film, depict the waste product of the Ruhr region's production of iron and steel[38]. This subject, and place, links directly to the subject and work of Bernd and Hilla Becher who photographed this industrial heartland extensively around the same time – as has been established in Chapter One. Smithson's photographs could hardly be more different in content and appearance from those of the Bechers. He photographs, for the

[38] Viewable as a double-page spread in Sobieszek (1993, pp.106-107).

most part, the ground, its surface coated with thick layers of elemental material substances. These piles of rejected or spent raw materials and thick dried slicks of waste invite the same entropic interpretation, the same consideration of time – linking geological time to present and future ruin – as does the sand deposited in Smithson's *The Sand-Box Monument (also called The Desert)*.

This chapter has built on the ideas of the previous chapter on the work of Bernd and Hilla Becher. Comparatively considered, the divergent, though linked, working methodologies and philosophies of practice of the Bechers and Smithson, distilled through new materialist thinking on matter, offer an expanded way of thinking photography that points further to the notion of comportment – as introduced in the previous chapter. Through his use of photographs, text, design and printed media, Smithson *pivots* (to borrow Stimson's term), in space and in time, in a directly phenomenological sense, in relation to the collective monuments of the Passaic landscape. Such defined pivoting, such as constitutes comportment, confirms matter and its properties of materials as they exist in flux within, as Smithson would claim, their subjugation to entropy. The properties of materials that Smithson invokes, within his transcription of his tour, through text and photographs and their conjunction, are those that constitute the various monuments he encountered, their immediate surrounds, the wider landscape, and his (as artist/photographer) body and mind. The sun, and therefore light, is also of course active, as subjectively described by Smithson, within this configuration (Smithson's monuments as very much *monuments-in-the-air*). The manner of Smithson's physical and mental pivoting is further determined by his bodily sense of the journey and by the matter of his textually expressed asides to time, place, memory, history, art, fiction and his own psychological state. My own work, as conceptualised informed by new materialism's expanded approach to matter, and as physically realised as the body of practice that comprises *BANK*, can be defined and articulated in similar terms.

Smithson's account of his photographic encounters, moving through the landscape of Passaic, considered in terms analogous to Benjamin's notion of the itinerant storyteller, is analogous too to my own photographic manoeuvres at site in the City of London. The subjectivity embraced within, and essential to, the craft of storytelling, as related

by Benjamin, mirrors the particularity of Smithson's manner of telling, recalling his own itinerant wanderings. My own confessed materially inflected subjectivity and the nature of my perambulation around Soane's wall, locates my practice similarly between the action of a report (the mechanical nature of the camera and the descriptive nature of its mimicking process) and the phenomenologically infused action of interpretation. Such a location remains spatially and temporally fluid bringing history, in a non-linear configuration, into play. Time and history are the subject of, and also agents within, the storyteller's craft. Smithson, as storyteller, conceives temporality in expanded geological in terms, and the matter of all history as forever expanding and dissipating – in entropic fashion. The present, pastness and projected future of ruined matter features strongly in Smithson's 'storytelling' – as evidenced within his Passaic account. Benjamin's actively interventionist conception of history, confounding the certainty of progress, also had recourse to ruin – creating a dynamic in time between past, present and future similar to that animating Smithson's notion of ruins-in-reserve. Smithson's concern for ruin, to which his recalling of 'monuments' also testifies, bears some relation to my own. My own photographic method invited aberration, such as the developing flaws and fissures of ruin might suggest. Within enactment of photography, this invitation opened to myself and to the mechanics and matter of camera and thing photographed. Within movement performed in hesitant and shifting proximity to Soane's wall, matter was experienced illuminated by waved matter of the sun's light dissipated and refracted through atmospheres and London weather, and bounced from one architectural edifice to another. The matter of the expired – ruined – film loaded into my camera compounded the aberration finally presented to myself and viewer. This openness to aberration thus places my practice in accordance with particular conceptual and physical strategies of Benjamin and Smithson, as alluded to above and as detailed in this chapter, including within the analysis of Reynolds and Richter et al.

Smithson's work with photography, contrasted with that of the Bechers, has allowed further engagement with comportment and its relevance as an idea, including in expanded form, to my own practice and this study's search for the elusive subject. The notion of comportment, as reconceptualised (in new materialist terms – giving priority to matter) earlier in this thesis, and as aligned or conflated with a new materialist intra-

active formulation of ontology, informs the concluding reflection on practice – and on its material processes – in the chapter that follows. Consideration of the significance of allegory within this conception of what photography is also features within this discussion. This final chapter more fully introduces the immediate physical subject of the practice: the Bank of England – specifically Soane's ribbon of wall. This thing that has been the focus of my camera's address is discussed in physical, spatial, temporal and directly historical terms – confirming the matter of its structure and the abstract and immaterial nature of its function.

## Chapter Five

## Matter, Photography and Ruin – the subject, process and outcomes of practice

In this final chapter I reflect in more direct terms on the practical outcomes of this study and further position this work in relation to the concerns, theoretical and otherwise, developed through the broad discussion of the thesis. The Bank of England is further introduced and contextualised as the subject of my practice. Aspects of the building's history and structure are placed in context with abstract notions of capital and exchange. The significance, increasing over centuries, of the Bank as a financial institution of state – accumulating wealth, consolidating power and exercising political and social control – is outlined in relation to the expansion of the building as a physical entity. The resulting body of photographic and video work is discussed in relation to the aims of the study addressing Brecht's critique of photography's limitations regarding the representation of abstract or unseen material realities. The account given is supported with reference to additional theory linking photography – as process, visual medium and physical artefact – to matter. The properties of materials significant to the works produced – photographs that make up the series *BANK*, and a work in video – and to what and how they communicate are brought to the fore within this discussion.

The chapter's discussion extends the discursive nature of the thesis content and its interrelation and dialogue with the practice produced on the study. Much of the writing reflects on the practice and its address, within the concluding section in particular, of the essential research question – as it has evolved throughout the course of the research and the development of its argument. That question, applied to my subject, Soane's wall at the Bank of England, has been further resolved as: how to communicate the abstract and unseen through the harnessing and activation of agential forces and their affect through photography – performed with expanded conceptions of matter in mind. In this way, this chapter, and the thesis as a whole, serves as an extended reflective account of practice – in which the writing itself, through the ways in which it engages philosophically with diverse abstract notions of matter within the matter of written

language, becomes practice. This approach is in keeping with the study's concern for matter considered in extended terms that serve to bring nature and culture together within the practice, in line with new materialist thinking.

**The Bank of England**

A simple photograph of the Bank of England can tell us nothing of its history or its impact on society. In the context of Brecht's assertion, the Bank replaces the Krupp works and the A.E.G. building. Brecht's damning of banks in his "play with music", *The Threepenny Opera* (1928), is pertinent in this regard.[39] The principal character, the thief Macheath, bemoans the banks becoming more criminal than the criminals:

> We bourgeois artisans, who work with honest jimmies on the cash boxes of small shopkeepers, are being swallowed up by large concerns backed by banks. What is a picklock to a bank share? What is the burgling of a bank to the founding of a bank? What is the murder of a man to the employment of a man? – *Act Three, Scene Three* (Brecht, quoted in Bentley, 1964, pp.92-93)

The Bank of England – the 'Old Lady of Threadneedle Street'[40] – is located in the densely packed streets of the City of London. Photographic views cropping its frontage, that facing the Royal Exchange, are frequently reproduced within everyday media representation. Within such stock imagery, the heavy and imposing neoclassical form of this architecture, often seen from an upward angle, projects the Bank's weighty sense of importance to the viewer. Such images connote the Bank's significance and power as an institution, and the collective financial machinations of credit, commerce and the money markets.[41] Despite the remoteness of its functions from everyday experience, the Bank, as symbol of the health of the nation's economy and wealth, assumed an increased level of visibility with the public as a result of the financial crisis that began in 2008.

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[39] *Die Dreigroschenoper* (set in London, this was an interpretation of John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* (1728).

[40] A nickname originating in a satirical cartoon by James Gillray, published on 22nd May 1797, entitled *Political Ravishment or the Old Lady of Threadneedle Street in Danger* (Keyworth, 2013, p.137).

[41] The Bank of England was independent until 1946, when it was nationalised. It regained some independence in 1998 – though government still wholly owns it and holds right of veto over its decisions.

The elevated early twentieth century facade that constitutes the abbreviated popular image of the Bank is not the interest of my practice. Instead, I am drawn to photograph the legacy in stone of an earlier architect's designs, specifically the surviving curtain wall of the building built by Sir John Soane, architect and surveyor to the Bank from 1788 to 1833. Soane's architecture once covered almost the complete three-acre site of the Bank stretching between Princes Street, Lothbury and Threadneedle Street. Soane was responsible, as he progressed his building works, for the reconfiguring and demolition of structures built by the Bank's previous incumbent architects, George Sampson and Sir Robert Taylor. Soane's wall, completed in 1808, like the construction of the Bank's ever-increasing number of halls and courtyards, was funded by the profits of conflict, the money accrued from interest on loans made to the governments of various warring nations. This had been typical of the Bank's expansion since it was originally founded in 1694 to facilitate the government's raising of funds for war with France (Kynaston, 1995, p.13). Phases of the Bank's construction orchestrated by Taylor, Soane's immediate predecessor, were also funded by the direct and indirect profits of war – the Seven Years War (1756-63), the War of American Independence (1775-83), for example (Abramson, 1994, p.117).

Sampson had built the first incarnation of the Bank in 1734, its construction and subsequent expansion over a three-acre site pursued at the expense of the local populace whose eviction sparked unrest. In June 1780, an attack on the Bank during the Gordon Riots was repelled by a combination of an appointed militia and troops (a contingent of which was then regularly assigned to the defence of the building) (Ibid., p.116).[42] During Soane's tenure, the Bank's introduction of £1 and £2 paper notes signalled a further bloating of the site to accommodate printing facilities and bookkeeping. (Ibid., p.117) The switch from gold to notes was triggered by the loss of faith in the security of gold – for fear of its theft from the Bank's bullion vaults, should Napoleon invade.

[42] Soane himself was inducted into the Bank's militia, as quarter-master (Schumann-Bacia,1991, p.87).

Fig. 16: *The Bank of England, Threadneedle Street, City of London: the bullion yard showing detail of the stone defences*, Joel Humphrey (1930), black and white photograph. (RIBA92157)

Against such threats, Soane's screen-wall was designed as a defendable blank façade.[43] Defensive elements were later added, including heavily protected observation slots creating forms reminiscent of a military bunker (Fig. 16). In 1848, Soane's successor as architect to the Bank, C. R. Cockerell, added parapets to the top of the walls, conveying, as he later remarked "palpably the idea of such a fortification as suits the nature of a Treasure house capable of defence." (Quoted in Ibid., p.127) A report in the *Morning Chronicle* on 11 April 1848 reiterated this need (this defence mounted in response to a large Chartist demonstration, part of which passed through the City of London on the way to Kennington Common):

> The Bank of England was not only defended by an extra garrison, but its parapets were surmounted with a breast-work of sandbags, so placed as to defend and cover the besieged, but allowing apertures sufficiently large to permit him to take deadly aim upon his assailants. (*Morning Chronicle*, quoted in Kynaston, 1995, p.163)[44]

[43] Soane, 1796, included battlements in his drawings for wall. A full account of Soane's designs for the Bank is given in Schumann-Bacia (1991).
[44] The final massed gathering of this demonstration is documented in a well-known daguerreotype by William Edward Kilburn, entitled: *Chartist meeting held at Kennington Common*, 1848.

The alignment (historical and contemporary) of institutional and architectural 'progress' with war and manifestations of power and state control raises human concerns which, according to Brecht, a photograph cannot show.

In 1858, Cockerell wrote a report entitled *Architectural Progress of the Bank of England* and began by tracing the history of the site back to Celtic, Roman and Saxon trading settlements. He used such archaeological and historical references to lend greater legitimacy to the Bank as an institution, suggesting that: "This site is still, as it ever has been, a centre of the vast commercial transactions of empire" (quoted in Abramson, 1994, p.121). So, the Bank is built on ruins, and has co-existed with ruins: building works going back centuries turning up, along with the detritus of previous construction (bricks, tiles and wall plaster), sections of Roman pavements and examples of pottery (Royal Commission on Historical Monuments, 1928, pp.35-56). Some of the smaller finds had apparently been carried there by the flow of the River Walbrook running underneath the Bank. The most abundant objects caught up in the silt were scraps of Roman leather sandals, the residue of local shoemakers (Ibid.) – a peculiar repository signifying, perhaps, an ancient psycho-geography.

Fig. 17: *An Imagined View of Soane's Bank of England in Ruins*, Joseph Michael Gandy, 1830, drawing (Sir John Soane Museum, London).

Soane's collective constructions for the Bank were detailed in a drawing by J. M. Gandy from 1830 (Fig. 17) that renders the building instantly uncanny, situating it

awkwardly – and strangely – in time, depicting it in cut-away, laying its interior spaces bare – as if ruined. Gandy's drawing also reads as a premonition, or acknowledgement, of the Bank's future ruin. Ruination was finally wreaked on Soane's creation in the 1920s to facilitate the construction of the current Bank. Architect Herbert Baker, in keeping with the City's ambition as a modern financial centre, built upwards, using, as architectural historian Nikolaus Pevsner put it, "Soane's masterwork as the footstool" for his design (Pevsner, 1973, p.182). "The virtual rebuilding of the Bank of England in 1921-37 is – in spite of the Second World War – the worst individual loss suffered by London architecture in the first half of the C20" was Pevsner's assessment of the demolition wrought on the old Bank. Regarding Soane's visible legacy within Baker's new Bank, Pevsner remarked: "To preserve the screen-wall only and scoop out the rest strikes one as peculiarly distasteful" (Ibid.). A photograph (Humphreys, 1925) (Fig. 18) taken from within the site of ruin of Soane's Bank, shows the inside of the curtain wall, the other side of which runs Bartholomew Lane – towards Lothbury.[45] It is at the other side of this wall, and in another time, that I worked with my camera, photographing the surviving matter of this ruination.

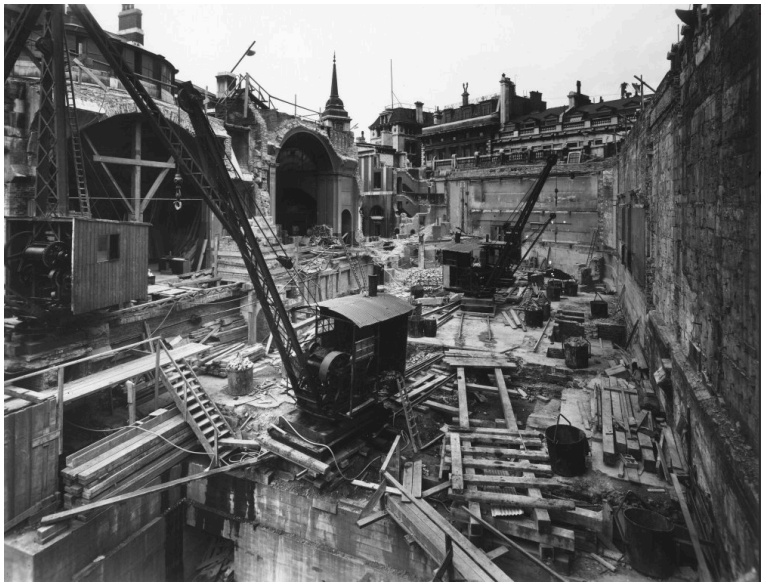

Fig. 18: *The Bank of England, Threadneedle Street, City of London: demolition seen from Bartholomew Lane entrance*, Joel Humphrey (1925), black and white photograph. (RIBA45898)

[45] The latter days of Soane's Bank, the processes of its demolition, and of the construction of Baker's imposition, are recorded in photographs by Joel Humphreys and Frank Yerbury. These are now held in the RIBA (Royal Institute of British Architects) archive.

Gandy's commissioned vision of the Bank in ruins can be viewed at the Soane Museum, at Lincoln's Inn Fields in London. The basement of this building, Soane's own house, is crammed full of architectural fragments, scavenged from the ruins of the ancient world. Soane's Bank was part of this constellation of ruin, even before it had been built.

## *BANK*

### Introduction to the practice – its subject and its production

My desire to photograph Soane's curtain wall at the Bank of England was triggered through a process of memory – formed within previous encounters with the structure going back decades – recalling my psychologically influenced impressions of its irregular and largely blank monumentality. That Soane's wall wraps the base of the building as a discrete (though invisibly integrated) entity added to my psychological sense of its strangeness, in terms of its form and function. The Bank's isolating island footprint, as defined by this irregular ribbon of wall, further invites circumnavigation on foot. This is how the photographic encounter began: at close-quarters, from the immediate proximity of the pavement, at the base of the bulking and rising forms of Soane's architecture. From here, the elevated early twentieth-century mass of Baker's Bank is out of sight – but not altogether out of mind. Knowledge of the incongruous weight of this modern imposition, of the new pressing down on the old, amplifies the building's relation to ruin. Soane's wall is a ruin impressed upon by a future ruin (a ruination yet to come).

#### The Bank, Soane and the uncanny

High alternating classical, blank, and heavy forms lend emphasis to the containing function of Soane's surviving screen-wall. An absence of windows, through the excessive resistance to visual penetration this absence creates, further enhances the

building's impenetrable image. Such visual as well as physical impregnability accentuates the unknowable and abstract nature of that which cannot be seen. The blank exterior face of Soane's wall confirms invisibility – refusing to offer up the slightest glimpse of its interior space, and denying any clue that might make material the nature of its operations. Such emphatic repulsion of sight and understanding renders the building uncanny. This unsettling sense of simultaneous presence and absence (of thingness and abstractness), experienced in direct physical relation to the largely unyielding façade of the screen-wall, is echoed here in these lines drawn from the notebooks of a key proponent of modernist thinking, Le Corbusier:

> A wall is beautiful, not only because of its plastic form, but because of the impressions it may evoke. It speaks of comfort, it speaks of refinement; it speaks of power and brutality; it is forbidding or it is hospitable; – it is mysterious. A wall calls forth emotions. (Quoted in Vidler, 1992, p.90)

Soane's wall, subsumed into the modern form of the Bank of England, speaks of almost all these things simultaneously. Emotion, in Le Corbusier's terms, is triggered in the material human *by* the material thing of the wall – by a force emitted *from* the wall. Such a dynamic and its result constitutes, at least a semblance of affect, either as Barthes's *punctum*, or Bennett's *actant*, or as a force akin to Barad's *intra-action* acknowledging the active process of the coming together of nature and culture.

At eye level, the Bank's containing wall alternates between simple blankness and asymmetrical arrangements of columns and other heavy stone features. These large expanses of stone, in their alternating smooth and jutting forms, offer no sense of comfortable familiarity or relief, their irregularity instead confounding expectation. Such experience of encounter, if pursued in a linear fashion, oscillates between the ease of certainty – regimented in stone – and unease, generated elsewhere by the randomness at play within the architectural order of things. Columns, seemingly gratuitously grouped together, and occasional recessed large, dark and resolutely closed sets of doors, provide vertical relief from the persistent horizontality of barren expanses of largely featureless stone. The Bank's façade emphasises rejection – experienced at close quarters. Its unlikely combination of architectural elements skews the wall out of kilter with presumptions of architectural heritage largely established on

classical principles of regular form and order.[46] These peculiar characteristics, experienced within encounter, conspire to render the building uncanny, although still resolutely solid enough, as perceived, to visibly demonstrate its function of defence. The footprint of the Bank creates corners – the most acute at the junction of Lothbury and Princes Street, and the most obtuse at the turn of Bartholomew Lane into Lothbury – that send walls extending out at different angles. Circumnavigation, clockwise or anti-clockwise, follows the narrow pavement circuit around the bulk of this irregular form. At a leisurely amble, this route takes around thirteen minutes to walk. The journey skirts the eroded and gently crumbling quarried stone – this fossil laden material leaching properties of geological time originated in the Jurassic past. At the corner of Princes Street and Lothbury, the route navigates a space simultaneously outside and inside of the building's structure, traversing a physical echo of its Roman influence: a semi-circular columned space Soane modelled on the Temple of Vesta at Tivoli. A twentieth-century architectural intervention now largely sucks this detail dry of its uncanny reference to ruin. The weighty mass of white stone that bears down on Soane's more fragile structure strips his homage to the ancient past of its essence.

Soane's exterior wall and the features built into it, at turns seem to rise up from beneath ground, or to be in the process of being pressed down into the London clay. Baker's twentieth century building that fills and rises from the void left by the "scooping out" of Soane's sprawling complex of various banking rooms, halls and courtyards, unbalances the composite structure – there is an uneasy visual coexistence between these two distinct temporal layers of the building. This architectural phenomenon generates, if experienced at a certain distance, a sense of the uncanny through its interplay between the near past (Baker) and the relatively distant past (Soane) – the present near past atop the still present distant past.

[46] The exterior appearance of Soane's Bank, a mix of Roman and Greek influences, was ridiculed in a poem, *The Modern Goth* (1796), published anonymously. These lines attack Soane's combining of various architectural elements: "... / Look where I will above around is shewn / A fine disordered Order of thine own, / Where lines and circles Curiously unite / A base compounded Compound Composite, / A thing from which it must with truth be said / Each labouring Mason turns abashed his head, / ...". (Quoted in Schumann-Bacia, 1991, p.90)

**Movement and the uncanny**

Within encounter with Soane's wall experienced close up, the effect of the uncanny is dependent on movement within seeing that scans the surface of the stone and the forms accommodated within its contours. Vision alights, breaking the continuity of movement, on a detail within the shaped stone – an aberration evident within a surface deformed by erosion and discoloured by the acid washes of rain or chemicals. The significance of such details, set within the blankness of the wall, is magnified through lack of architectural context or sense of proportion. My movement, within the act of looking and within the photographic encounter, is made in the face of the resolutely static nature of the subject of my gaze. The gesture of movement loosens the wall's structure from its moorings, unsettling, in material and temporal terms, the fixity of its stone.

**Photography – materialities of production**

The majority of the photographs produced during the course of this research were shot as colour negatives using a camera – Mamiya C330S – made in the early 1990s, though based on a design dating back to the 1950s. Originally commonly used across a range of 'professional' contexts, it is now, as an analogue film camera, largely considered anachronistic in terms of such uses. The 6x6cm (2.25"x2.25") film image size (with twelve exposures on 120 format roll film), is termed medium-format but is towards the smaller end of this category. In choosing this particular camera, I am adopting a modest technical approach to the work – limiting the possible size of high 'resolution' print reproductions due to the relatively small dimensions of the working negatives. This technology is positioned between the non-professional 'point-and-shoot' instamatic of Robert Smithson and the traditional precision of large-format field cameras, such as those used by the Bechers (taking 13x18cm or 20x25cm negative sheet film). The Mamiya C330S has interchangeable lenses – I have for the most part used an 80mm lens, the standard focal-length for this format that approximates human vision in terms of scale and perspective. Smithson's 'amateur' Instamatic also produced square negatives. This shared aspect of production (ignoring the different qualities in

optics) affords comparison between respective sets of images – if only to place, within further reflection, Smithson's use of photography in firmer comparative context, technically, materially and visually, with my own.

**Architecture, out-of-date film stock and Ruin! Ruin! Ruin!!![47]**

My use, within the course of my photographic encounters with the Bank, of out-of-date film stock alludes to the ruin of my subject – the ruins that inspired Soane and the ruins that the building will become, the Portland stone returning to its core matter of sand and fossil residues. The films used were between two and eight years past the stated expiry dates of the Kodak and Fuji manufactured stock. Some rolls were stored in a fridge, in accordance with storage advice, and some not. Ruin, for Benjamin, represents the allegorical physiognomy of nature-history (Benjamin, 1998, p.177).

> In the ruin history has physically merged into the setting. And in this guise history does not assume the form of the process of an eternal life so much as that of irresistible decay. Allegory thereby declares itself to be beyond beauty. Allegories are, in the realm of thoughts, what ruins are in the realm of things. (Ibid., p.178)

An allegorical reading is invited by the coupling of Baker's early twentieth century Bank with the vestiges of Soane's early nineteenth century structures. The process of ruination conferred on Soane's Bank prefigures the demise of Baker's Bank – as will ultimately occur with the collapse of its over-inflated form and of capitalism itself. The ungainly rise, predicated on abstract forces of finance, of this awkwardly layered – physically and temporally – monumental building, will be the history, merged into this City of London setting, that in material terms, will again assume the form of irresistible decay prophesised in Gandy's drawing. Benjamin's assertion (Ibid., p.179) that, "In the process of decay, and in it alone, the events of history shrivel up and become absorbed in the setting", attains in allegorical terms, particular pertinence

[47] "Ruin! Ruin! Ruin!!!" are words spoken by the 'Old Lady' in Gillray's cartoon from 22nd May 1797 (previously referred to on page 133), entitled *Political Ravishment or the Old Lady of Threadneedle Street in Danger*. The cartoon itself is reproduced in Keyworth, 2013, p.139).

when projected onto the inevitably crumbling form of the Bank's architecture. This is especially so given the invisible or abstract nature of money that *is* its history.

My use of out-of-date film stock mimics, in allegorical terms, the ruin of the structure to which the gaze of the camera was directed. The materially compromised state of the film was attested to in advance, the expiry date printed on the foil wrapper of each film roll confirming as much. This engagement with unpredictability and chance (and acceptance of imperfection and aberration) represents a contrived mimicry that claims allegorical purpose. Such promise of ruined imagery, to be achieved through the assumed ruin of chemical emulsions (the collapse of their ability to accurately render colour), underscores the instability and fragile nature of the analogue photographic medium (its material properties, even in its processed state, doomed to break down unpredictably over time). This acknowledgement of ruin and of its inevitability accords with Smithson's pessimistic view of the order of things. Dissipating energies will ultimately resolve in entropic equilibrium (the skewed colours of the film negatives bleaching out to a material state bearing no trace of image). Within my work with photography, ruin acts conceptually and materially as Brecht's something "*built-up* … artificial, posed." Flaws that occur within the material and chemical nature of its making may be the undoing of an analogue photograph, or it may fall victim to the fragility of its own physical form as an object. The film negative may be hopelessly scratched, or the photograph torn or vindictively cut to pieces. Similarly, the status of a photograph as objective record can be ruined by the selective defacing or erasure of its content. The ruination of an object photographed can be thus deferred to the demise of the photograph itself. The fragile nature of photographic prints signals the potential for such ruin. Such presentiment of ruin is applicable even to the fickle form of the digital data file. The ever-expanding detritus of digital images that clutter the ether of the web demonstrates the entropy of photography. The virtual photograph, through its very ubiquity, coupled with the increasingly confused, corrupted or lost context of what it portrays, loses its original energy of meaning – only very occasionally reenergised through creative appropriation and reinterpretation. Hito Steyerl (2009) critiqued the appearance and ubiquity of poor or degraded quality images in the digital

realms of pirated DVDs, mobile phones, computers and web.[48] Poor images, produced or corrupted within contexts of both 'high' and everyday culture, provoke, she argued, unthinking automatic repetition on the part of maker and viewer. Conversely, Steyerl saw only limited value in the poor image set in opposition to capitalistically driven fetishisation of high resolution. She saw that: "The poor image is no longer about the real thing – the originary original. Instead, it is about its own real conditions of existence: about swarm circulation, digital dispersion, fractured and flexible temporalities" (Ibid., 2009, p.8). Given the massively inflated volume and expanding forms and contexts of poor images that float virtually in the digital air, Steyerl's text is simultaneously out of date but also prescient. The implications of her survey, then and now, are predicated on properties of digital matter comprising both still and 'moving' images. As the virtual image universe expands through ever increasing duplication, photography's power is thus diluted, its illuminating effect on knowledge and understanding diminished. Digital photography is the ruin of any pretence at photographic veracity. The endless mutability of its component parts of ones and zeros demolishes the photograph's status as evidence. In the context of social media, the photograph may be a more democratic virtual artefact, but its credibility has been all but destroyed. On the other hand, this collapse of a photograph's authority can distance, in ways that might spark deeper and more questioning thought, the viewer from photography's seductive powers.

**The Bank of England, Performance and Photography**

Architecturally, the high and largely featureless form of Soane's surviving wall still succeeds in lending emphasis to its containing function. The Bank itself, as a building and as an institution, remains for the most part invisible and unknowable in terms of its interior space and its operations. In spatial terms, the street level form of the structure presents itself as a potential site of performance – inviting the curious to a psycho-geographic perambulation of its circumference. The spaces surrounding the Bank also offer, in ways not unrelated to the context of *performance*, a site of popular

[48] Hito Steyerl is an influential filmmaker and artist, as well as writer and critic on new media art.

protest and, conversely, state control – as was witnessed during the G-20 London summit in April 2009. Confronted by the weighty façade of Soane's screen-wall, my own performance photographing the Bank is preoccupied with self, psychologically and even emotionally. My Mamiya C330S has twin lenses (one for seeing and one for taking) and a waist-level viewfinder. The Bank's image is awkwardly cropped and reconfigured, through the device of this camera. The building *addresses me*, through lens and ground-glass screen, as I address it. My gaze shifts from the thing that is my subject down into the small misty square of light. The image focused resolves back-to-front – though still the right way up. The reconfiguring of what I see emphasises materiality, binding me into a material process through the act of photographing. My being and action, as photographer, is momentarily subsumed into the Bank's expanded material status – its properties of material, at the click of the camera's shutter, etched by reflected light onto the matter of chemical emulsion. My usually hand-held operation of the camera creates a distance between myself and my subject whilst, conversely, contributing to an intensity of experience that implicates me in the photographs I take and make. I become entangled within the flux and flow of the Bank as a material entity – as a building-in-the-air – and am implicated as witness and recorder of the entropic vibrancy of its matter.

This concentrated sense of being accentuates an awareness of time in relation to the place where I am, responding to the deadness of things – the scuffed, chipped and stained Portland stone, eroded by pollution and the chemicals used to clean its once blackened surface. The fossil residues of its stone are impacted with the residues of splashed coffee and sticky drinks, scraps of fatty food and gobs of chewing gum. The narrowness of the pavement vantage-point enforces an encounter at close quarters. Such proximity fills the camera's viewing screen with tightly cropped details of wall and stone removed from almost all sense of architectural or spatial context. Description is bound by this square of faintly illuminated glass through which these fragments of a thing are isolated and then severed from their surroundings.

The encounter remains largely at eye level or below, conditioned by the extent to which the apparatus employed can comfortably accommodate my gaze. At close-quarters, the direction of my looking is thus biased emphatically towards the

refurbished nineteenth-century past of Soane's wall, whilst deliberately ignoring the twentieth-century edifice that looms above. The performance is then one of selection, albeit performed through a process in part dictated by the camera itself, within physical and optical limitations of space and distance. It is dictated, too, by the prejudices of the photographer (and this performer's predilection for ruin). The original newness of Soane's architectural innovation existed symbiotically with a sense of ruin associated with the classical past. In a similar symbiotic way, the now of the photograph exists with a presentiment of the death, or ruin, of its subject. This idea fits with Smithson's formulation of the *ruin-in*-reverse, in which buildings "*rise* into ruin *before* they are built" (Smithson, 1996, p.72). Soane conceived and built his architecture embracing the certainty of its future ruin, as his commissioning of Gandy's aforementioned drawing of the ruined Bank also attests. Within this accepted temporal and temporary order of things, the Bank rose, and rose again, into ruin. For Smithson, photographing in Passaic, "arrested moments were not about what was taking place in the landscape as much as they were about points in time in which he lost himself within the slow flow of entropy" (Sobieszek, 1993, p.32). In similar encounter with entropic ruin, I am aware, counter to the fixity of the photographic image, of the impermanence of things within the flux and flow of matter.

**Photography and new materialism reiterated**

Thinking photography through new materialism resolves what it is to photograph – placing the photographer in significant relation to, if not necessarily in alignment with, the properties of material that constitute the thing – in its significant place in the material world – to be photographed. The photograph, whether physical or digitally virtual, extends, including through human action, these concerns of matter – through the flows of its own material state and of its material mimicry of materialities, and through the flows of its dissemination in the world. The photographer too, emphasised as *performer*, is implicated as involved agential matter in flow in the act of photographing.

**Movement, Time and the Revelation of Ruin**

Performing with my camera in close proximity to Soane's remnant wall, I imagine the reserve of gold bars stacked somewhere below ground. As I circle the Bank, I am circling too this pile of precious metal (heavy, inert, elemental matter invested with abstract notions of value) nestled among ruins of ancient London. As I photograph, I step over the hidden mosaic of a Roman past and walk above the scorched earth of the Great Fire[49]. Within the dénouement of the film *Superman* (1978)[50], the super-hero, desperately seeking to reverse the murderous ruination of a dam, soars to the edge of space and repeatedly circles the earth at peak velocity. The temporal friction his excess of speed generates, travelling against the direction of the globe's rotation, succeeds in turning back time. Thus, Superman's extreme circling motion effects the resurrection of the human dead. This image from a popular but illusory medium enacts a Benjamin-like arc of redemption. Photography enacted with or through performance may effect a similar relation to time, rescuing the past in the present, or the present through the past, instead of merely condemning the present to deathly future. My circling of the Bank with my camera cannot turn back time and cannot reverse history – cannot correct the social ills of institutional architecture, high finance and State – but as I perform the circle, I do enter a different relationship to time. In performance, along the arc of the circle, time does indeed seem to stand still. I am aware of the length of the exposures I make – perhaps a sixtieth of a second, perhaps (with the very occasional use of a tripod) half a second, perhaps one second or even two. As I look down into the ground-glass viewfinder of my camera, time, as I experience it, becomes vertical. Each exposure and advancement of film aligns time (as latent negative and inverted image) underneath time, vertically down the length of the filmstrip. Though vertical and abstract, a narrative of orientation, in space and in time, is recorded as well as felt. In the process of enacting this circularity of travel, around the Bank's circumference, I am, if only in hopeless analogous terms, attempting to breach the wall and to split the temporally confused building apart. I would like to fracture and bring prematurely to ruin the apparent solidity of its form.

[49] The site of the Bank of England is located at the eastern edge of the area of the city consumed by the Great Fire of London (2nd to 6th September 1666).
[50] Directed by Richard Donner, with Christopher Reeve as 'Superman'.

My circling steers me into the stone curtain of Soane's wall, into its crevices and the darkened void spaces of its form. In such corners one might see, between the soggy cigarette butts and the fragments of food missed by passing pigeons, tiny swirls of white fossil dust of Portland stone, washed off by acid rain or the scrubbing of over-zealous graffiti removers. Through the action of wind, or the footfalls and pecking of pigeons, the powdered stone spirals with the black of everyday City of London grime to become an irreversibly mixed grey dirt. These gritty corners become analogous to Smithson-like sand boxes in miniature, attesting to slow but relentless processes of entropy. This allusion to energies, their dissipation and their legacies, echoes too Bennett's insistence on the vibrancy of matter, as referenced in Chapter Two.

The resulting photographs from this series of encounters vary in terms of the focussed scale at which they describe the stone matter of their subject. Within the limit of the pavement's width, I manoeuvred, philosophically as well as physically, to find the right distance and angle of view. Soane's wall, its agency of uncanniness felt, drew me closer. Surfaces of stone, within my performative process of finding and holding focus, were closely but tentatively read through the glass of the camera's viewing lens. Light reflected from geological matter bounced the short distance into my camera, through the narrowed aperture of the 'taking' lens, and was closely registered onto the film's compromisingly aged emulsion. Collectively, the photographs that comprise *BANK* intimate space as well as framing isolated details of the wall's textured stone skin. Seen together, the photographs deconstruct Soane's wall, forming a set of variously miniaturised (for the most part), discontinuous two-dimensional representations depicting disparate areas of surface and fractured angles of ambiguous solid form. In series, the photographs form a deceitful map of a performance, constructed from several surveys conducted over a duration of several months. The result is a temporally vague reconstituted topography of stone.

## *BANK*: Reflection on practice

The practice pursued as described above, collectively titled *BANK*, exists, and can be produced, in the following forms:

Prints of various sizes produced within an analogue process onto chemical photographic paper.

Prints of various sizes produced as digital prints from scanned negatives.

A series of fifty-two photographs printed in broadsheet (52-page) newspaper format.

A series (open-ended, but with five realised) of photographs commercially printed onto 40"x60" *blue back* poster paper.

Also:

A thirty-minute video created as an experimental companion piece to the photographic work.

Examples of work with expired Polaroid film – generated as a precursor to the photographic practice that followed.

One example of a photograph from *BANK* closely-read transcribed in literary form is included within the Appendix.

Fig. 19: *Untitled*, from *BANK*, Ian Wiblin (2010 to 2020), analogue colour photograph.

**The photographs that comprise *BANK*:**

The formal presentation of the practice – photographs (e.g., Fig. 19) resulting from the methodologies and means of encounter outlined in this chapter – is not prescribed in precise terms. In line with this approach, the photographs are not intended to be definitively sequenced in chronological order of when they were made. This temporal discontinuity allows a mixing of the varied aesthetic qualities of the photographs – the result of their origination from variously 'ruined' film stock, films with earlier expiry dates generating photographs with increased skewing or separation of colours and accentuated grain. The sequencing can also mix distances and angles of view – with no evident simulation of the wall's structure or its geographic contour around the building. All photographs have been, and will continue to be, printed full-frame – i.e., with no cropping – to preserve the integrity of the photographer's original intention (at the moment of acute perception) regarding precise composition. No captions are applied that would identify any specificities of location – such as street names. Despite the limits imposed on geographical context, the photographs are still intended to speak of their subject. The series is open to reordering, dependent on the restrictions or nature of its dissemination – in exhibition or within publication. The sequencing of the images is therefore not predicated on concerns of narrative – at least not a fixed or literal narrative indicating a coherent movement across and around the combined masses and surfaces of stone. There are exceptions to this that are intended as potential breaks to the serialising of single discreet images. These comprise paired images, taken one after the other, which, seen together, indicate small movements made by the photographer, mentally as well as spatially repositioning the camera in relation to the form of the subject (for example, Fig. 20). The articulation these diptychs provide of the address of the photographer, navigating around pronounced three-dimensional architectural features, invites from the viewer another way of looking that confounds expectations set up by the work presented in straightforwardly serial form.

Fig. 20: *Untitled*, from *BANK*, Ian Wiblin (2010 to 2020), analogue colour photographs.

The sequencing of the photographs can be considered in terms of editing, or more specifically, montage – as developed within cinema as well as photography. The montage constructed in the context of this practice was predicated on the aesthetic and formal qualities of individual photographs. In essence, this is a modernist approach to the presentation of the photographs – or, given the questioning within the work of the medium's authority and fidelity, an approach positioned between modernism and postmodernism (if considered in these binary terms). My rejection of captions counters the Bechers' inventory styled labelling of their individual industrial specimens, which, rather than opening the work to the viewer, serve instead to close down or direct interpretation. Smithson's use of oblique or faux documentary captions is substituted within my practice by incorporation into the work of extended textual accounts of individual photographs.

Rather than a map of the wall's surface, the photographs cumulatively represent their subject more in the manner of a mosaic, as defined by Siegfried Kracauer, writing on photography contemporaneously with Benjamin and echoing Brecht's concern regarding the representation of the reality of labour: "A hundred reports from a factory do not add up to the reality of the factory, but remain for all eternity a hundred views of the factory. Reality is a construction". (Kracauer, 1998, p.32) Rather than through the implied narrative of reportage, Kracauer instead suggests reality can only be constructed by the viewer as a "mosaic" formed from comprehension gained through "single observations" (Ibid.). Conversely, the breaking apart of the whole, within a

process of comprehension, is suggested in dynamic terms, by architecture scholar Jennifer Bloomer:

> The shattered whole is a synthetic whole (although it may appear to be an analytic whole of additive parts), in which the shattering is the mechanism of the syntax. (Bloomer, 1993, p.68)

Bloomer, in terms analogous to photography, proposes a shattering of a whole in order to then create a "synthetic whole" open to understanding. The result of Bloomer's shattering, and key to knowledge, are "fragments". The fragment is the equivalent of a Kracauerian mosaic piece, each comprehended individually. Bloomer's fragmentation, occurring within the concept of architecture as language, echoes too Benjamin's consideration and use of language – as discussed in the *Storyteller* (Benjamin, 1973, pp.83-109) and practised in his writing, most notably in the *Arcades Project* (Benjamin, 2002). This fragmentary approach was, for Benjamin, a vehicle towards finding the right distance. The breaking of the Bank into pieces through the lens of the camera opens the structure to view, creating the distance necessary to consider it anew. The abruptness of shattering, effected in language or through photography, is the antithesis stone's formation in geological time – tiny spheres of ‘ooids’ and ‘ooliths’ becoming buried together, cementing, through the geological epoch, the whole. My camera fragments the stone, ruining the already ruined building and inviting its reconstruction as a premonition of future ruin. If my photographs are pieces of a mosaic, then they represent just a tiny number of fragments from the shattered *whole* of the Bank. The shattering, in this case the act of photographing, creates the language through which the now synthetic whole can be understood. It is precisely through the synthesising of reality, rather than through its faithful replication, in photographic terms, that the right distance, as necessary for understanding, is found. This is a conscious move against photography's too often enacted pretence of objectivity.

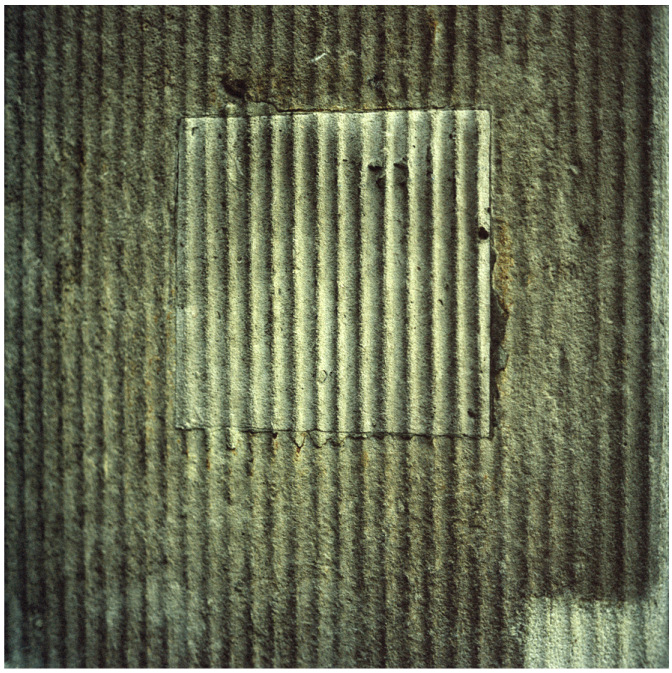

Fig. 21: *Untitled*, from *BANK*, Ian Wiblin (2010 to 2020), analogue colour photograph.

- **Analogue to digital**

A selection of photographs (including Fig. 21) resulting from this practice were produced as prints for an experimental exhibition (*BANK*, 2015)[51] at *Schwarzwaldallee*, a small independent gallery of contemporary art in Basel, Switzerland. These prints were the product of an analogue process corrupted by digital intervention. The openness to chance facilitated by my use of expired – or ruined – negative film partially negated by digital post-production processes of scanning, retouching and inkjet printing. The control originally ceded to the erratic and unfaithful film-stock loaded into my camera I now took back, through the digital translation of haphazard patterns of film grain into pixels – into data comprised of the certainties of ones and zeros. My reluctant quality control of images judged on a computer screen, forced an awkward alliance with processes of digital restoration. The purity of the

[51] Dr Chris Müller (Cardiff University), co-editor of the book *Credo Credit Crisis: Speculations on Faith and Money**(2017), added some textual interventions to this exhibition. *A chapter of this volume ('The Bank of England in ruins: Photography, money and the law of equivalence', pp.87-127) features black and white reproductions of several photographs from *BANK* as a visual intervention into the text.

original ruins of my photographs has thus become tainted, largely as a result of my own aesthetically motivated judgements and decisions. This digital overhaul has rewritten the history of these photographs – and in so doing has obscured the uncertainty of their genesis: as tiny explosions of light etched onto the jaded chemical formulation coating the film lodged at the back of my camera. The digital intervention has salvaged or re-imagined colours in ways that could disingenuously suggest a truthful rendering of reality. Now digitally expunged is the legacy of the analogue process, the dust and scratches that once impaired the surface of the original negatives having disappeared. Such defects were initially writ large through the scanning process but have subsequently been obsessively vanished by localised re-orderings of pixels. Counter to restoration, this intervention instead promises only ruination of the original digital ordering of the photographs. Digital restoration in this sense offers a ruin in reverse – the analogue (or digital) originals digitised into ruin. I outline this history and these interventions here to draw attention to what might otherwise have remained invisible. In essence the photographs represent the ruins of their original intentions – the analogue and material linkages of film emulsion to stone now severed. My recourse to digital means has demolished the material grounding of the work, as originally posited and resolved in analogue terms. In their printed form, the photographs exist as conceptual, aesthetic and material contradictions. Without explanatory text they would remain, in ways mirroring the opaqueness of the institution of the Bank itself, rather dishonest contradictions obscuring, and thus denying, the original investment of the work in analogue material and processes. Despite, or because of, their inescapably unfaithful digital resurrection out of analogue ruin, these photographs can speak at least a little of the past, present or future ruin of their subject: the Bank of England... and what resides materially out-of-sight within that subject's, or thing's, blank walls.

- ***BANK*: Fifty-two-page broadsheet publication**

The self-published form of one serialisation of photographs resulting from the study is positioned between commercial and artist practice. This sequence of fifty-two images is printed on newsprint – the material properties of which impact profoundly on the aesthetic appearance of the photographs in reproduction, dulling their colour. The

34x50cm broadsheet (Fig. 22) features a photograph on each page, sized at 30.5x30.5cm.

Fig: 22: *BANK*, Ian Wiblin (2021), 52-page broadsheet publication, (documentation photograph showing front page).

This relatively large size of reproduction, within what is essentially a newspaper format, also sets up a particular physical and material confrontation for the viewer – accentuated by the handling required to move through the work, turning from page to page. The thirteen sheets that comprise the broadsheet in its folded form produce a sense of weight, adding a sense of material significance to the artefact. The ruin built into this work, through the use of thin paper prone to tearing and discolouration through exposure to ultra-violet light, also connects this work with concerns of matter central to the practice. The additional soft fold horizontally across the centre of each image serves to undermine of any sense of preciousness that might be attached to the work, as art. The puckering of the paper caused by the folding also visually compromises the stone surfaces and structures the photographs depict.

This incarnation of the practice has been edited with no particular rational, other than applied aesthetic and associative concerns of montage, for the flow or pairing of photographs. This modest broadsheet, again adopting a commercial format, signals potential for future materially re-worked publications presenting the photographs in reordered series. It illustrates too how an organised volume of photographs (embracing elements of sameness and repetition as well as deliberate contrast) can open the work for the viewer/reader. The content, appearance and process of looking (reading) is intended to engage the viewer with time and with history. The back page of the broadsheet contains, at the bottom and in small type, the words of Daniel Defoe addressing the immateriality of financial credit.[52]

- ***BANK*: 60"x 40" sheets**

The mutable methodologies employed within the practice aspire cumulatively to a close reading of aspects of Soane's wall. The openness of the work's proposed presentation invites the viewer to mentally extend this reading. The scale of the prints for exhibition or reproduction can vary, dependent on space and pragmatics of publishing. The most 'ruined' representations already start to break apart at a relatively small size (26x26cm and 30x30cm), but the materialities of such images can be brought out more emphatically through greater enlargement. This has been tested within the practice with prints made on 40"x60" sheets, fabricated for external (as well as internal) display as posters. As so produced (Fig. 23), these prints offer a very different viewing experience and sense of encounter.

[52] Like the Soul in the Body, it [credit] acts all Substance, yet is it Self Immaterial; it gives Motion, yet it Self cannot be Said to Exist; it creates Forms, yet has it Self no Form; it is neither Quantity or Quality; it has no *Whereness*, or *Whenness*, *Scite*, or *Habit*. If I should say it is the essential Shadow of something that is Not [.], (Daniel Defoe, quoted in O'Brien 1996 p.612, original source: Defoe, 1710, p.9).

Fig. 23: *BANK*, 40"x60" *blue back* poster print, Ian Wiblin (2021), (documentation photograph).

Elements of text are included at the base of these prints, loosely echoing Brecht's colliding of image and poetic writing in *War Primer*[53], cited in Chapter Three. The (relatively) large scale of this commercial printing process (on printing stock known as 'blue back') explodes aesthetic qualities inherent to the original scanned negatives so that they become materially other – through mechanical reproduction. The format and appearance of these prints also invites site-specific installation – including, though not necessarily a planned intention, as an intervention into Soane's architecture, at the site of the Bank itself. The mosaic of the photographic practice as a whole is also ripe for further consideration as a kind of site-specific puzzle, inviting the viewer to match details of three-dimensional architectural surface and form to their respective two-dimensional representations – perhaps as a precursor to a re-photographic survey of the wall. Although again not at all the intention, such a hypothetical application illustrates the work's concern for the opening of history through photography.

[53] On the five sheet prints produced, the Brecht quote, as central to this thesis and its practice, is used. Its content and ideas are sufficiently distant from what the photographs show to open the works to further thought. In this way, this incarnation of the practice bears some relation to the combining of text and image demonstrated in Brecht's *War Primer* (2017).

Brecht's *War Primer*, through its juxtaposition of image and text, is also a form of montage – one that, as Didi-Huberman says: "establishes a position-taking – of each image regarding the others, of all the images regarding history – and this in turn puts the photographic collection itself into the perspective of a new work of *political imagination"* (author's italics) (Didi-Huberman, 2018, p.111). This *taking of position* of images (rather than *taking sides*), through montage, allows an opening up of the work (including to readings of history) as a collection. This is the intention of *BANK* in exhibition and within works such as the broadsheet publication.

- ***BANK*: A photograph closely read**

This literary close reading of an apparently random photograph from the series responds to other aspects of the study regarding the value of written description. Although, here, an individual photograph has been singled out, thus conferring on it some sense of significance, the description is intended to deepen consideration of the series, as an unfixed entity, in material terms. The physical as well as mental process of reading and contemplating the constructed description activates, or brings into recognition, for the viewer the properties of matter of the photograph and of its depicted subject. As defined within the thesis, close reading is intended to offer new knowledge in this context, as a device through which the viewer is engaged with the work at a certain distance – in a Brechtian or Benjaminian sense –, moving away from the photograph(s) themselves, through the device of the text, in order to be brought closer to it.

The strategies indicated above are in part employed to refute high-fidelity methodologies that present to the viewer apparently faithful representations of the things they depict. This questioning of documentary reality responds to Guy Debord's contention, voiced in his film *Critique of Separation* (*Critique de la Séparation*) (1961), of the need to dissolve the subject:

> The cinematic spectacle has its rules, its reliable methods for producing satisfactory products. But the reality that must be taken as a point of departure is dissatisfaction. The function of the cinema, whether dramatic or

> documentary, is to present a false and isolated coherence as a substitute for a communication and activity that are absent. To demystify documentary cinema, it is necessary to dissolve its subject matter. (Debord, 1961 (Film))

These words are spoken over a 360-degree panning shot, shot from the centre of a Beaubourg square destined for ruin (the construction – into ruin – of Rogers's and Piano's *Centre Pompidou* then imposed upon it). Debord's mistrust of documentary and of cinema extends his critique of capitalism and the separations it, in a human material sense, depends upon. Debord ultimately rejects the deceitful simulacrum images provide of material reality, countering the commodified images with anti-cinema – in which the viewer was, for example, confronted with a blank white or black screen for lengthy durations of time.[54] A rejection of, capitalistically driven, technical advances in still and moving photographic media production also informs my work and my interest in the notion of ruin. In my practice, this has extended to experimental work with video.

- **The video image: *City Circular*** (SD, 30mins, silent) (Ian Wiblin, 2021)

The process, within the act of photography, of literally moving into experience of the uncanny, shifted me psychologically from *operator* to *performer*. The physicality of performance and its basis in movement suggested the value of extending this study to the illusory and documentary qualities of the 'moving image'. The use of video connects my photographic practice to film work pursued collaboratively with Anthea Kennedy (although the physical subject matter and regard for narrative is very different).[55] The result, *City Circular*, produced using standard definition (SD) MiniDV video tape, is a single shot gathered on a walk around the Bank's circumference – the small video camera hand-held, my eye pressed to its viewfinder. This method of making removed me from direct confrontation with Soane's wall – its miscellaneous interrupting architectural features now uncomfortably encountered in

[54] Debord's (2013) anti-spectacle and anti-capitalist methodologies, as employed within his films, are discussed in a special issue of *Grey Room* (see Bibliography).
[55] The three feature-length documentaries I have made together with Anthea Kennedy, as noted within the introduction to this thesis, are each, in their address of place and history, concerned with architecture in a variety of forms.

electronic miniature. An 'assistant' (Anthea Kennedy) gently corrected my orientation to the surface of the building – ensuring a continuity of distance and that obstacles, such as people, were safely negotiated. Periodically along the route, I felt compelled to break the concentration of my looking. Taking my eye momentarily away from the viewfinder, I readjusted myself bodily and mentally in relation to the building. Still moving onwards, I shifted the gaze of the camera in continuous response to glimpsed particularities of architectural form passing across frame. At particular points my movement of the camera was instead motivated by memory – recalling specific previously observed (and personally affecting) details of the Bank's decaying stone surround. An element of premeditation, in terms of what, in vaguely precise terms, the complete shot was to include, infected the apparently raw and automatic intent of the video. On a simple level, the resulting work (which is itself deliberately simple) is to some degree reflexive – its own materiality revealing a great deal about its own making. The slow but constant onward progress of the scanning image readily equates with the operator's gait and point-of-view. The frame of vision gently shifts up and down, a glimpse of pavement occasionally seen, or higher sections of wall and loftier details of architecture. Scrutiny of form and surface often lapses in void spaces opening between and behind columns (Fig. 24), or succumbs to the darkness of over-sized metal doors. The closeness of this encounter denies the viewer a revelatory sense of context. People do appear, at the beginning and occasionally later on, anonymised by framing, movement and angle-of-view. Just like the stone of the wall they are seen against, the people too are matter. The journey around the Bank is completed in around seventeen minutes, but the image continues on, ending at a seemingly arbitrary point two-thirds of the way into a second circumnavigation – the final frame filled with flat sections of stone. Some minutes before this end a glimpsed reference to the architect is seen. This video was made without sound – and is designed to be presented mute. The absence of sound is intended to invite, on the part of the viewer, a deeper sense of physical as well as mental engagement with image and the movement it articulates.

Fig. 24. *City Circular* (Ian Wiblin, 2021), standard definition video (still frame).

In exhibition, alongside photographs from *BANK*, the video is designed to be shown on a cathode-ray tube (CRT) monitor. This analogue mechanism of presentation interprets, via a digital file (and media player), images gathered on magnetic tape, the core – essentially analogue – originating medium of MiniDV.[56] This combining of low-resolution video (interfacing between analogue and digital) with anachronistic analogue display serves to further accentuate the materiality of the image. Rather than becoming spectacle, the monitor presented moving electric image attains a relation to surveillance. The surface of Soane's wall is shown as silently surveilled, the camera capturing details recognisable as those imaged individually in my photographs. Thus, the video becomes a rough and incomplete reference guide for the series of photographs – affording glimpses of architectural context and indication of relative location. Considered in this way, the video is a partially ruined (the medium used now defunct) record of ruin. The circularity of its form is also analogous to Smithson's entropic image of a child walking in circles. The insistence of the camera's gaze and its image, sustained within perpetual onward movement, travels towards ruin. The video file itself is susceptible to glitches, or the crude bunching of pixels, the result of the primitive codec's limited range and depth of colours, or of digital compression.

[56] CRT technology was the staple of domestic television and computer monitor production until the advent of liquid crystal and LED modes of display and the switching off of analogue television signals. Surviving CRT monitors are most often encountered in art galleries – having been used extensively over decades in the work of, for example, Nam June Paik.

The lack of sharpness and definition, inherent to the medium itself, is compounded by the scanning movement of the camera, the shifting imprecise aesthetic of the image mirroring the degrading properties of material of the wall's Portland stone. The single shot, through the demands of its lengthy duration, takes the viewer, in a Brechtian sense, outside of the work. Their experience of watching thus conditioned – and dependent on the circumstances, materially and spatially, of encounter – contributes to the video's material essence. Movement and time also combine to create, through the awkward and at times hesitant flow of image, an allusion to the "progress" of history (as critiqued by Benjamin). What is being shown, slowly read and tentatively described, is a building *with* a history – history etched into stone whose fractured and eroded surface is mimicked by the low-grade video image.

**A note on the origins of the practice – in the making of Polaroid images**

The practice, as indicated earlier, began with experiments at Soane's wall making images with a Polaroid SX70 camera using film packs that had long passed their expiry dates (and which had not necessarily been stored under the most suitable conditions). The resulting very ruined images pre-empted the main body of work to be produced on the study. The manner of their making, in terms of process, in itself represented an invitation to affect – due to the awkwardness of encounter, at close quarters confronting and attempting to focus the surface of the subject. The (relative) immediacy of the viewable image that each Polaroid exposure yielded also, in terms of expectancy, added to the experience. The images, of gritty columns and other architectural features, rose, in a Smithson-like way, into miniature ruin, before my eyes. The sandy surfaces of dirtied stone made strange through their unfaithful mimicry in greenish and bluish hues infected with balloon-like darker shapes, or stained with acid yellow streaks. These Polaroids also confirmed the importance of the square as a format for the work to follow. Its even proportions lent at least some sense of neutrality, of dimension, to the work – restraining the subjectivity of method applied. The square became a compositional device within some of the later work perhaps due to the findings of these initial Polaroids. Fitting the square within the square determined, at site, a particular choreography of movement – in search of a point-of-view. The idea of the square within the square was applied with the intention

of inviting a particular response, from the viewer, to the depicted surface and to the imagined scale and depth that the photograph represented. The square suggested a sense of geometric order and symmetry – an order and remnant of comportment made strange and quietly uncanny through the speculative and bodily nature of the photographic encounter and the (often) ruined nature of the realised outcomes. In simple but not insignificant terms, an equality of dimensions offered a space within which to, sometimes, centre my subject – centre the square within the square – thereby achieving some comparative semblance of the apparent objectivity of centred composition employed by the Bechers within their (rectangular) photographs. This aspect of my recording process shared at least some visual affinity theirs.

Other early Polaroids record fragments of images on a computer monitor of stilled video showing distanced aerial views of demonstrations at the Bank of England in 2008, at the time of the G20 London summit. The Polaroid images, through their ruined, miniaturised and partially abstracted aesthetic form, shift these manifestations of protest toward the unreal and the ghostly. This relation of the abstract to the real through the analogy or allegory of the photographic image, is an essential element that was carried through the work entitled *BANK*.

Fig. 25: *Untitled*, from *BANK*, Ian Wiblin (2010 to 2020), Polaroid.

## Conclusion

### Towards new knowledge: the expanded material properties of photography entangled as an essential ontological matter of process – with agency of revelation

The particular combining of elements within the course of the study, the development of its theory and the relation of that theory, through the application of evolved methodologies, to the practice, has resulted in a body of experimental work.

The materiality of photography, its properties of material, to use Ingold's formulation of material emphasis, has always been an important ontological element of the medium. This is immediately evident from the nature of its invention through the alchemy of physics and chemistry. These elemental forces, flows and actions, acting on the matter of emulsions have been the subject as well as the stuff of photography over nearly two centuries. The pursuance of materially emphasised approaches, driven conceptually as well as practically, has persisted over this time, carried over from analogue processes to the digital medium – brought materially into being by an unbroken chain of practitioners, from founding experimenters such as Nicéphore Niépce, to László Moholy-Nagy, to Susan Derges, to Thomas Ruff et al. Concern for matter is evident too in photographic debate, as demonstrated by Elkins's materially oriented preoccupations worked through in *What Photography Is* (2011). Elsewhere, discourse exploring the indexical implications of swapping light-sensitive emulsion for digital sensor is manifestly centred on materialities of chemistry and the immateriality of data. Kaja Silverman, through the prism of analogy, does foreground material concerns as being fundamental to what photography is. "Photography is ... an ontological calling card: it helps us to see that each of us is a node in a vast constellation of analogies".[57] She quotes a passage from Walt Whitman expressing accentuated qualities of matter constituting such a constellation – in lines such as: ""A vast similitude interlocks all / All spheres, grown, ungrown, small, large, suns, moons, planets, ...", and, ""All gaseous, watery, vegetable, mineral processes, the fishes, the

[57] Like Geoffrey Batchen, Silverman too explores the analogous title of Fox-Talbot's *Pencil of Nature* that seemingly calls the relation of nature to culture into question (Silverman, 2015).

brutes, / All nations, colors, barbarisms, civilisations, languages, / All identities that have existed or may exist on this globe or any globe, ..."" (Whitman, quoted in Silverman, 2015, p.11). Whilst some of these interlocking similarities are recognised, others are not, Silverman says, "particularly those that call our autonomy, agency, unity and primacy into question" (Ibid.). Her position critiques the problematic confrontational dualism of nature/culture and signals a need to move beyond this limitation of thought. Whitman's "vast similitude" that "interlocks all" supports her contention that, within the constellation of analogies she posits, photography, in thought and in terms of matter, is both vehicle for analogy and analogical in itself:

> A negative analogizes its referent, the positive prints that are generated from it, and all of its digital offspring, and it moves through time, in search of other "kin". (Ibid.)

Silverman echoes, as a conception of photography, Ingold's conception of a tree – as a constellation of properties of materials, expanded through air and time. To place such thinking further within the orbit of new materialism, we might swap *constellation* for *entanglement*. The sense of expanded and interconnected matter is the same. New materialism, by positioning culture *within* the constellation or entanglement of matter, and as part of the great interconnecting flux and flow of matter (much, incidentally, as Whitman's words suggest), looks beyond notions of primacy pitting culture against nature. Identifying, of course, that culture, even in the fulfilment of its own agency, is comprised of the properties of materials too, as in this sense, as in Barad's notion of "Meeting the Universe Halfway", meets matter halfway (Barad 2007), Robert Smithson, in the material of his writing, casts cameras into a maelstrom of cosmological matter (on which photographic imaging depends): "The camera reminds us", he says, "of that most brilliant object the sun", which, "is not an object, but rather an undifferentiated condition from which there is no escape." (Smithson, in Flam, 1996, p.376)

Rosalind Krauss (1999) identified, in strong critical terms, that "by the 1960s photography had left behind its identity as an historical or an aesthetic object to become a theoretical object instead" – the cause being photography's loss of specificity as a medium. She pursued her argument by looking at contemporary developments in

theory and practice through the prism of Benjamin's ideas, principally those explored in *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (Benjamin, 1973, pp.219-253) highlighting the impacts and dangers for society and culture of the convergence of arts and the rise of new media forms. Krauss projects Benjamin's notion of aura and its loss, with regard to photography, onto examples of contemporary photographic art practice – much of it emerging out of, or influenced by, conceptual art and its inherent theory. The identity of this work, Krauss argues, has lost any specific sense of its medium, becoming instead, to varying degrees, a pastiche of converged art and media forms. As practitioners of photography's "inherently hybrid structure", Krauss cites the Bechers and Smithson. Smithson's work for assuming, as in the *Passaic* article, "the guise of photojournalism", and the Bechers for the "photoconceptual" nature of their "self-imposed shooting assignments" (Krauss, 1999, pp.292-295).[58] Thinking photography in materially expanded form, as discussed in this thesis and explored through its practice, extends the boundaries of specificity determining what photography is. Considered as a materially extended construct, applying conceptions of matter evolved within new materialist methodologies, the subject of a Becher photograph becomes decentred, bringing readings of matter at the periphery and beyond the limits of its frame into play. The entanglement that is its medium specificity lends photography this agency – such as can be recognised and activated through description applied through the form of close reading proposed and performed within this thesis. My advocacy of description, both through and of photography, and its address of the properties of materials, counters abstract theory and conceptual approaches to the medium.

Brecht's conundrum has been considered through an entanglement of materialities. It is this combining that offers insight equivalent to new knowledge. Alignment with strands of theory originating in new materialism has facilitated this opening up of the medium.

If considered in phenomenological terms, the results of this practice, materially evidencing organic and uneven flows of bodily movement around the Bank of England

[58] Krauss aligns the Bechers' work with commercial practice – a comparison of form and application also made by Stimson within his contemplation of the content and appearance of their photographs.

building, tentatively speculate on existence and notions of the real – through the physical and cognitive process of perception. Coole and Frost, in the context of new materialism, speak of phenomenology in these terms in relation to matter, existence and knowledge:

> Phenomenology, in Husserl's formulation, can come into being as a first philosophy only if it suspends all that gathers together as a natural attitude, not through Cartesian doubt but through a way of perceiving the world "as if" one did not assume its existence as taking some forms rather than others. (Coole and Frost, 2010, p.237)

Seeing without a "natural attitude", seeing outside of the familiar and without assuming existence, can be ideals for photography – and for the illusory moving image – conceived in the light of new materialism. Uncertainty and doubt leave room for questions, such as refute certainty. Materiality figures strongly in such an adopted formulation and would recognise the photographer (as perceiver) as a material conglomeration of body, camera and eye entangled with light and a host of other matters. Orientation matters here too, given the emphasis it lends to the materiality of the photographic encounter – between operator and the thing (to which the operator is oriented).

This constellation of material elements answers Brecht's call for a photography that is "built up" (and which recognises, in the "bodily presence" of both photographer and thing, the value of the inherent materiality this process of building up suggests). Such material concerns also construct a positive link between the something built up and the something artificial – the fabrication of the something artificial itself demanding a particular conceiving of material relationships and orientations. This expansion, within the thinking of photography, of material considerations – of what, in material terms, constitutes a thing, and of what constitutes a photograph that shows the thing – has value beyond abstract thought. Materialities within practice thus foregrounded become, articulated in Ingold's terminology, materialities-in-the-air.

So thinking photography through the lens of new materialism can be expressed in terms of ontology. My practice and my thinking about my practice, as pursued with a conceptual, psychological and bodily emphasis on matter, represents a search to

identify the ontology of the medium – or an attempt to reposition the medium, as conceived in expanded material terms, in relation to ontological concerns. The defining of photography – its essence, or what photography *is* – has been the subject of enquiry of theorists (and photographers) over several decades. The first experiments with the invented medium were discussed, including by Fox Talbot, as suggested by the title of his famous publication, *The Pencil of Nature* (1844) (as identified by Batchen (1999)), in essentially ontological terms. André Bazin's essay, *The Ontology of the Photographic Image* (1960) (summarised, incidentally, in the introductory chapter to *Photography Theory* (Elkins, 2007)) was – as is significant to my own study – a key influence on Barthes's quest to identify the medium's essence and its affects. Bazin's account is perhaps most often interpreted as proposing an ontology of the medium founded on the supposedly faithful nature of its replication of that which is photographed. Within this ontology, a photograph is recognised as an indexical trace of the thing photographed (thus emphasising a relation to reality – the photograph having a direct attachment to the real). Such a conception also locates photography in time – conceptualising a photograph as a relic of that which it represents. This conception does also invoke the idea of ruin (of the thing photographed – the thing itself surviving, as a relic, in the physical form of the photograph). Such activation of ruin as an idea, as conduit for affect and the revelation of history (as elusive subject), that my own study manifests, does also position my work in relation to the past. In mitigation of this, contextualisation of my practice and its ideas in relation to the thinking of Benjamin and the ideas and practice of (in particular) Robert Smithson, who, in their different ways also position photography towards a future (revelatory in the case of Benjamin and entropic in the case of Smithson). Bazin's conception sees photography, ontologically, as a process, the result of which is "an image that is a reality of nature", experienced by the viewer as an "hallucination", of the "fact″ (Ibid., p.9) that the photograph, as a photograph, has *embalmed* (Ibid., p.4). Much documentary photography, the Bechers' work included, effectively, in these terms, embalms the thing photographed – thus directing the viewer in the present to consideration of the thing in its photographed past (the relic of the photograph confirms the thing's location in a past). This relic-oriented relationship between past, present and future is further determined by oscillations sparked between nature and culture within the taking or making of the photograph and within its viewing. My

contention is that a new materialist conception of photography allows the matter of the thing, as photographed, to persist within the extended flows of matter that constitute the photograph itself. Thus, the matter of the photographically embalmed thing retains, in the viewing present, its vibrancy with agency enough to spark affect and speak to the future. Although its conception and enactment have, in part, been determined by new materialist thinking often couched in purely theoretical or abstract terms, the practice that has emerged from this study has sought to foreground, in material terms, the physicality of its making. Within my performance of photographing at the Bank of England, new materialism's reconceptualising of matter as a coming together of nature and culture, rather than as a binary and often oppositional relationship between nature and culture (such as favours culture over nature), the apparently dead matter (nature) of Soane's wall comes alive (the vibrancy of its properties of materials impacting on the conceptually intentioned and bodily enacted progress of the encounter and its material outcomes).

Within this configuration, meeting the universe of Soane's wall half-way (the photographer's culture now also part of nature), the ontology of photography becomes something else – extended in its conception as an assemblage of flows of matter. Acknowledgement of the subsumed matter of the performing photographer within *intra-action* with the material properties of stone that constitute Soane's wall raises photography above the essential indexical essence of its apparent mimicking function. This conception becomes in itself, as the sum of its intra-acting flows of matter, its own ontology.

Such an extended conception of photography, posited in ontological terms, sits well with the functioning of allegory – as discussed, in the thesis, in relation to the thinking of Benjamin and the practice and methodologies of Robert Smithson. Ontology claimed in these terms for photography, encompasses, along with the matter of physical and chemical mimicry, the bodily matter of the photographer and the physical and mental oscillations that are the essence of perception and the photographic act. Such processes are allegories of other *becomings*. Silverman's thinking of photography in extended analogous terms, as identified within the conclusion to this thesis, suggests

a similar concern for ontology premised, including through her reference to Whitman's poem, in terms of constellations of matter.

My thinking and my practice can also be aligned with the notion of *comportment* (as derived by Stimson from phenomenology). In a sense, my conception of photography and the process of my making of a photograph, considered in the broadest of material terms, represents a reconceptualising of comportment. My theoretical and physical position, as a photographer at site of the thing to be photographed, and within the act of photographing, at site, finding the right distance and angle of view, operating the device of the camera and exposing light-sensitive material through its lens, constitutes an equivalence of comportment. This is how I physically as well as mentally pivot in relation to the world I address, through my camera.

Such a formulation of comportment translates readily onto the idea of ontology – whilst at the same time pushing at the limits of its conception. So translated, in these expanded terms, onto the photographic act more generally, comportment becomes merged with the idea of ontology – to the extent that, in a sense, comportment equates to ontology (an ontology that features nature and culture in intra-action). The dynamic of movement inherent to Stimson's phenomenologically invoked to and fro action of pivoting – pivoting in relation to the subject, pivoting between subjectivity and objectivity, between culture and nature, and backwards and forwards in time – adds further animation to the already vibrant constellation of matter subsumed within this expanded notion of photography's ontology.

Thinking photography through ideas of matter central to new materialism has facilitated this all-encompassing material conception of ontology – a conception in part grounded in philosophical ideas (which, in themselves have informed new materialist theory) drawn from Husserl, Bergson and Sartre et al. (Husserl's thinking within phenomenology – within which the notion of the pivot is key – connects Stimson's ideas with new materialist thought.)

Despite his alignment of photography with facts (the index), Bazin did also recognise the revelatory function of photography and expressed this in material terms:

"Photography affects us like a phenomenon in nature, like a flower or a snowflake whose vegetable or earthly origins are an inseparable part of their beauty". (Bazin, 1960, p.7) He also visualised, within equally materially accentuated text, the psychologically prejudicial action of the photographer and the process, as he saw it, of its confounding, effected by the neutralising camera lens:

> Only the impassive lens, stripping its object of all those ways of seeing it, those piled-up preconceptions, that spiritual dust and grime with which my eyes have covered it, are able to present it in all its virginal purity to my attention and consequently to my love. (Ibid., p.8)

Love for the photographed object, and the revelatory manner of its emergence out of the material physical and mental actions of photography, places Bazin's appreciation of the medium in alignment with phenomenological concerns for matter to a level deeper than his insistence on photography's essentially indexical nature might suggest.

The materially, as well as mentally, oriented consideration of the process of looking and operating, manifest within the act of photography, to which even Bazin's text alludes (as indicated above), collides looking, perception, description and expression. Recognition of description, in terms of its value as neutral description – given the distance it achieves, in mental and temporal terms, opening out possibilities of understanding and revelation – also fits well with ideas of new materialism. Such description, as argued previously within the thesis and as realised or enacted within the practice, in the context of new materialism's extensions of matter and its flows, accentuates matter and an awareness of matter. Description, in this sense, facilitates the coming together of nature and culture – merged together in the time and action of describing.

Though not an attempt to claim any new knowledge in the field of philosophy, I recognise that philosophical ideas derived from phenomenology, such as those I have encountered throughout this study, have informed the resulting practice. This alignment became particularly pertinent when considered in relation to the more recent turn in theory pursued, collectively, as new materialism. My study, in terms of the modes of its practice, resulting in the series of photographs that comprise *BANK* (in its

various forms) and the video work, *City Circular*, foregrounded subjectivity (against objectivity) and, within its search for the essence of the thing photographed and of the medium of photography itself, was concerned with the mechanics of perception. I thus do position the contribution to knowledge resulting from this study in some relation to philosophy, essentially phenomenology, as relevant or pertinent to the matter of photography and the making of photographs, and to thinking and experiencing photography. My photographs, in the matter of their making, absorb and hold as a residue, ideas derived from new materialism, and from phenomenologically oriented philosophy considered through the prism of new materialism. My enquiring approach to practice synthesised the various ideas encountered in theory, testing the usefulness of applying new materialist thinking to photography. The resulting bodies of work are an attempt to realise and make manifest physically – and materially – ideas that might otherwise remain, as theory, abstract and speculative.

Ethical concerns apparent in the realm of photography must, pursued in the light of new materialism, extend to the matter on which the industry depends, such as labour and rare minerals, and the materialities of human exploitation and pollution. Such extended concerns of matter, applied critically in this context to the medium and industry of photography itself, reveal the problematic implications of this dependency and the still very troubling post-colonial and imperialist relations of power under which, in the name of capitalism and globalisation, labour is performed and environments contaminated. Such concerns of labour in particular hark back to Brecht's critique, expressed in a Marxist context, of the exploitation of labour – to which his attack on documentary photography (as represented by an imagined photograph of a factory building) alludes. The activities of the Bank of England of course perpetuate such exploitation. The abstract and invisible nature of the Bank's functions, and of finance and credit on which those functions are based, are concerns that the practice of this study, in a research context, has attempted to address. This body of work has sought to avoid the reification offered by the objective report and has looked to, with recourse to expanded notions of matter and through the strategies of method applied (as Brecht's something "built up"), invoke instead the agency of affect – such as can open an image and activate the viewer.

**A note on the wider research context of this study – considered in the context of this conclusion**

As reiterated towards the beginning of Chapter Five, writing and concerns of language, considered in materials terms, became an important and integral element of this study. Although not directly comparable, the research element of the writing itself responds to diverse published textual constructions which in themselves suggest expanded ways of thinking and realising abstract notions, in part through their reflection on physical matter. Although not referenced within the thesis, Paul Virilio's book *Bunker Archeology* (2009)[59] provided an example, which, specifically through its particular combining of diverse though linked elements, constituted a contribution to knowledge (if considered in that academic context). Important to this work is Virilio's recognition of the value of subjectivity and his combining of his original photographs, of ruined military structures, with personal testimony of encounter in part based on memory, and with archived matter of typed Nazi military commands. In a similar way, architecture theorist Jennifer Bloomer's book, *Architecture and the Text: The (S)crypts of Joyce and Piranesi* (1993) has been another source of inspiration – although not one, in terms of its construction of text, that I could usefully or appropriately emulate. Of relevance and significance to my own study, however, is Bloomer's bringing together, through recourse to allegory, of architecture and writing (and reading) in a work that collides, foremost among other elements, the textual and linguistic play of Joyce, Soane's fixation on ruin and Piranesi's visionary projections of simultaneously labyrinthine and imprisoning space. The result is a book that in a sense uses abstraction to construct, through notions and devices such as fragmentation and mapping, a shared material sense of architecture and language. Bloomer's book bears some relation to Smithson's textual pieces – also concerned with (as is the *Passaic* example featured in this study) text, architecture, ruin, perception and time. In terms of the deeply thought eclectic nature of their content and themes, as well as the, to differing degrees, fragmentary nature of their constructions, these examples also fit within a lineage of textual works that share an affinity of intent as well as form with Walter Benjamin's vast, in comparison, and unfinished *Arcades Project* (2002). As with my own study,

[59] Originally published in France as *Bunker archéologie* (1975).

the intent of this range of texts is to provide new knowledge through particular reconceptualisations of history – which have their basis in directly material concerns – that open out thinking, towards revelation of what might otherwise remain abstract (rather than closing down thinking – such as would, through the denial, ignorance or avoidance, of such material connections, reify reality in limited and impoverished form). In a more contemporary context, the writing of architecture theorist and academic Jane Rendell on architecture and art, including in the book *Site-Writing: The Architecture of Art Criticism* (2010), performed within often fragmentary texts that juxtapose, in a montage-like way, different linguistic and textual forms and images. Her writing often, as again is true of the examples cited above, retains a palpable sense of its author, thus demonstrating the value of acknowledged or proclaimed subjectivity within, or in the context of, academic writing. Rendell terms such research pitched between art and architecture as 'Critical Spatial Practice'. My research, driven by practice, has a similar spatial emphasis and, I believe, contributes new knowledge in this context. In terms of practice, I recognise that overtly subjective approaches to photography are, of course, common and have always been so. However, my subjectivity is pursued, in the context of this research, in acknowledgement of the medium's straight-forwardly reporting function. Thus, my work has sought, within its questioning of the nature of the medium, to explore the shifting relation of subjectivity to objectivity that operates within the act of photography. This clashing together of the reporting of, and subjective response towards, the thing photographed, is aimed at realising agency and its affect – thus opening the photograph, in a Brechtian way, to the viewer. Such a shock of opening occurs in particular bodies (there are many) of photographic practice to which, to some small degree, my research is aligned. These examples, such as Paul Graham's *New Europe* (1993), Sophie Ristelhueber's *Fait* (1992) and Michael Schmidt's *Waffenruhe* (1987), have a particular regard for place and history – as visually reconstructed and photographically communicated (including, in particular, through the manner and matter of their gallery installation), by the individual photographers, instilled with differing degrees of abstraction and allegory. Guido Guidi's (2014) pairings of near identical framings of architecture, suggesting a slight move in vision and shift of perception, serve also to contradict the certainty of the photographic image. The unsettling effect of this method achieves an opening of the photograph(s) and (again, in a Brechtian way) the activation of the

viewer. This study has sought to better understand the essence of photography, materially as well as conceptually, and has pursued this quest through recourse to new materialism's insistence, in expanded terms, on the flux and flow of matter and on the bringing together of nature and culture (such as are traditionally seen, within oscillations between subjectivity and objectivity inherent to the photographic process, as in play *against* each other). Thus, although I certainly acknowledge much valuable work in photography that exploits or alerts the viewer to the limit or trickery of photography, in terms of its veracity and relation to the real, I contend that much of this work is driven, including through its process, conceptually, rather than subjectively, and claims its own certainty precisely through the sophistication of its conception and method (as an influential contemporary example, I can cite, though not to in any way dismiss it, the collective work of the Belgian artist Max Pinckers). Within such work culture retains precedence and holds power, through its projected intellect, over nature. This distinction, in the context of this study – as realised in the series of photographs entitled *BANK* – marks the intent of my own limited practice out from such work. It is important to acknowledge that many photographers and artists are precisely concerned with, or make a virtue of, the materiality – and its vagaries – of the medium. The various projects of Stephen Gill, for example, have employed a range of materially determined practices, often inviting chance – through the use of found cameras, buried and rephotographed photographs, and so on.

My practice, directed by Brecht's criticism of photography, seeks to place and test my own materially oriented or foregrounded methodology, and its subjectively infused regard for the real, in and against a largely abstract political context situated in relation to a particular history. In this respect, my research also responds to methodologies formulated and employed within filmmaking derived, in part, from Brechtian ideas and concerns. Danièle Huillet's and Jean-Marie Straub's film *History Lessons* (*Geschichtsunterricht*) (1972) is one such example that combines elements of reflexively acted fiction, interpreting a Brecht text imagining self-interested business dealings and conversations of Julius Caesar, juxtaposed with long essentially documentary shots made through the windscreen of a car travelling through the narrow streets of contemporary (ancient) Rome. The affect of this juxtaposition of elements is

history. Particular films of two German documentarists, Jürgen Böttcher[60] and Peter Nestler[61], through their individual accounts of the material processes of industrial making (with Marx and Brecht as influences on both) seek, in their own ways, to make materially tangible human experience, of making, articulated through emphasis on the matter of the craft of labour, and on the matter to which that labour attends. Thomas Heise's film, *Heimat is a Space in Time* (2019), approaches subjective and documented accounts of a family history in a formally interesting and affecting way within a slow montage of elements juxtaposing and layering family correspondence, photographs, archive documents, spoken voice and, within shots of extended duration, filmed exteriors. The film, in part through its 218-minute length, constructs a material sense of place and history – that of a German family's experience through the twentieth-century. There are, of course more contemporary examples of documentary film that I could cite – but most of these, those of interest, are indebted to the work of Huillet and Straub. The many architectural documentaries of Heinz Emigholz, through their relentless and conscientious attention to the matter and form of architecture, demonstrate an (unclaimed – his film methodology predates new materialist thinking anyway) affinity with new materialist intentions. Through the slow meticulousness of his method, as in *Sullivan's Banks* (2000) and *Bickels (Socialism)* (2017)[62], Emigholz as filmmaker merges into the space and volume of the architecture he films. This sensibility and rigour of filmmaking is confounded, as a kind of shock, by Emigholz's propensity, in some films, to make recourse to fiction – again achieving the distance of Brecht.

My approach to photography has allowed me to work towards identifying a way of thinking the medium that recognises the vibrancy of matter and the agency of its affect.

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[60] Jürgen Böttcher, as an artist and filmmaker in East Germany, made, among other films, observational documentaries about the nature of work, such as *Blast Furnace Removal* (*Ofenbauer*) (1962), and *Shunters* (*Rangierer*) (1984).

[61] Peter Nestler, a West German documentary filmmaker, self-exiled to Sweden, has made many documentaries portraying the process and craft of labour, including *Bergshantering / Järnhantering, Del 2* (*Mountain Management / Iron Handling, Part 2*) (1974), and *Hur gör Man Glas? (Hantverksmässig)* (*How to Make Glass? (Craftsmanship)*) (1970).

[62] Emigholz's film *Sullivan's Banks* (2000) depicts, through an extended montage of shots, the architecture of eight banks in America designed by architect Louis H. Sullivan, and the feature-length film *Bickels (Socialism)* (2017), largely employing a similar form of construction, depicts the architecture of 22 kibbutz buildings in Israel designed by Samuel Bickels.

As stated earlier, I propose a conception of photography as materially all-encompassing process – as an intra-action – between nature and culture. This is largely in opposition, as this research has set out, to the predominant course of discourse on photography that, through the applied nature of its theory, has favoured culture over nature. Some writing, such as examples authored by Jelena Stojković (2018) and Julia Peck (2016), on photography informed by new materialist thinking, have emerged in recent years. My research offers an additional contribution to knowledge in this context, facilitating further the reorientation of theory, as applied to discourse on photography and to the making of photographs (including the context of film).

## Glossary

This glossary covers terms, as well as nomenclature associated with specific art and philosophical movements, some of which may appear within the Introduction as well as within individual chapters of this thesis. The short entries have been written with the aim of creating, where relevant or useful, links between terms and the ideas they suggest or represent. Some entries also contain references to specific academics or scholars associated with a particular term or discipline. The overall content of the glossary also provides an indication of the eclectic and discursive nature of the study and the writing that follows.

**Acquaintance:**
As used by Bertrand Russell to identify what he proposes as the first phase of perception leading towards knowledge – the second phase being ***description***.

**Actant:**
A term used by Jane Bennett within her book *Vibrant Matter* (2010), though derived from Bruno Latour, that suggests the source of actions, within interrelationships of matter. Bennett uses this term to illustrate that apparently inert matter can equally well cause effect within an interrelationship, of whatever nature, as can human matter, thus demonstrating the ***vibrancy*** of nonhuman matter. The term is used in place of ***agency*** – which has a closer association with subjectivity, thus with culture over nature.

**Affect:**
The use of *affect* as a term within the text of the thesis follows the sense of its invocation and application by Roland Barthes within his book *Camera Lucida* (2000). Affect in this context is intended to refer to, or suggest, an emotional shift experienced by a viewer on looking at a photograph. The term also has resonance considered in context with philosophical thinking in the area of ***phenomenology*** and is applied within the thesis to the contemplation and study of objects and place, as well as of their photographic reproductions.

**Agency:**
Agency is used, in human terms, within the thesis to identify or suggest the held potential of a thing, or of a (photographic) representation of a thing, to provoke an emotional response in a

person within the process of their encountering of a thing, or within their viewing of its representation. In this context, agency is the potential to produce ***affect*** – such as can affect emotionally the person encountering the thing or representation. In this sense, agency is an emotional trigger – as in Barthes's notion of ***punctum***. The notion of agency is also referred to and used within the thesis in ways derived from its application within the writing of several scholars in the field of new materialism, such as Karen Barad. Barad's own use of the term links with her conception of ***intra-action***. Within her definition, agency is thus not the privilege of the thing but is the *process* of "doing/being" within "intra-activity" (Barad, 2007, p.235).

**Allegory:**

Allegory is referred to in the thesis to indicate (including as important to particular writers or artists) the potential for words or imagery to communicate beyond their immediate literal or illustrative function – to suggest parallel real or imaginary ideas or processes, located within nature or culture (or within convergencies of nature and culture). Allegory, in this sense, can shift a viewer's, or reader's, thinking between different forms or permutations of matter.

**Analogy:**

Distinct from ***allegory***, analogy, in writing, constructs a sense of similarity between one thing and another – for the purposes of articulating or expressing a specific idea relating to a thing.

**Anthropocene:**

An alternative identification and naming of the current geological epoch fitting, contestably, with a measurement of time dating from the point at which humanity, through the impact of developing civilisations, industrialisation and militarisation, began to determine the fate of the planet. Although not scientifically recognised, and with no agreed date identifying its commencement, this epoch is conceived as succeeding the Holocene at some point between 15000 years ago and the 1950s (in 2016, an influential group of experts – 'Working Group on the Anthropocene' – determined that this new geological epoch succeeded the Holocene in 1950).

**Assemblage:**

This term is briefly cited within the thesis to demonstrate a linkage between the thinking of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1988) and new materialist ideas concerning the complex and ever-shifting relationships of matter. The use of *assemblage* as a term, if applied to matter, is in itself an assertion that matter can be conceived as a process of connectivity (or coming

together) – that a body of matter remains fluid and unfixed. Deleuze and Guattari use this idea analogously within their discussion.

**Aura:**

This term is used (as derived from Walter Benjamin's writing on photography) to suggest the imbued ***agency*** or ***affect*** of a thing due to its inherent physical qualities or status as, in a material or aesthetic sense, a unique or in some ways exceptional thing or photograph. In its form as a singular original artefact, a photograph, Benjamin noted, exudes a level of aura that its mass-produced printed reproduction cannot replicate. Benjamin uses the term to critique the limits of, as well as the power of, photographs in their singular and mass-produced forms.

**Chronicle / Chronicler:**

As used by Walter Benjamin to identify a form of itinerant storytelling offering versions of history as alternatives to the reports of historians.

**Close-reading:**

Used within the thesis to identify the slow methodology of looking and of describing what is seen (at site or within image), as proposed and applied within this project. The contention of the thesis is that such prolonged and impartial study can open the thing or its photographic representation to the viewer – thus further inviting the ***agency***, or ***affect***, of the thing or its image, to become manifest. This term is borrowed from its application within other iterations of this methodology practised within literary, art and other critical studies. In opposition to those approaches, the form of close-reading applied with this study refrains from interpretation and its accompanying critique – and is practised premised solely on description. With the intention of distancing this form of study from the interpretative cognitive mechanics inherent to the reading of a text, ***deep looking*** is proposed as an alternative term for this methodology.

**Constellation:**

As used by Walter Benjamin to illustrate the seeking of revelatory understanding through the bringing together of individually thought ideas as a *constellation* of thinking. Within critical thinking, it is the dynamic of this constellation that sparks understanding. The idea of such a constellation is itself an example of a Benjaminian ***thought-image***.

**Culture:**

A sense of this term is used that suggests an oppositional force to ***nature*** (in that culture represents everything human, both physically and in terms of intellect). Culture's relationship with, and the impact upon, nature is a primary concern of new materialist thinking.

**Deep looking:**

*Deep looking* is proposed by myself as an alternative term for the devised variant on the methodology of ***close-reading*** that is integral to the practice of this study. *Deep looking*, as a term, loses the inherent interpretative emphasis of close reading, asserting instead some relation to notions of time and space – as has greater relevance to the intended purpose of the activity, as variously applied within both text and visual practice.

**Description:**

As used by Bertrand Russell to identify what he proposes as the second phase of perception leading towards knowledge – the first phase being ***acquaintance***.

**Diffraction:**

As coined by Karen Barad and as applied by her within new materialist thinking, this term is used briefly in the thesis to illustrate the value, towards understanding, of nuanced and layered forms of comprehension. Barad derives her definition of *diffraction* from the same term within physics used to describe the effect, in terms of process, of variously diverging, converging and overlapping routes taken by waves through and around obstructions. The implication of movement inherent to the related term of *reading diffractively* accommodates the changing or shifting and interdependent nature of matter and its forces.

**Dialectical materialism:**

Briefly cited in the thesis to acknowledge the significance, in terms of influence on revisions within new materialist thinking, of Karl Marx's (and Friedrich Engels's) emphasis within their philosophical ideas – defined in material terms – of conditions experienced in the world. Social exploitation, such as labour, *dialectical materialism* contends, is better understood through an applied emphasis, within thinking, on the material nature of labour. In this way, the matter of labour itself is thought before the effects of its processes on human experience. The shift in thinking between matter and process is the dialectical element that provides understanding. This mode of thinking opposes *idealism*, which would lend emphasis, within critique, to an idealised, rather than objective, reality. Proponents of *dialectical materialism*, and its varied

applied interpretations (such as manifest in the work of Bertolt Brecht), thus make a claim for *realism* (in refutation of idealist modes of thought).

**Dialectics:**

Refers to a process of thought and discourse colliding different (objectively, rather than emotionally, formulated) points-of-view. Understanding emerges from the differences or contradictions that become evident between these differing viewpoints.

**Dialectics-at-a-standstill:**

A moment of insight, such as might occur within dialectical discourse or thinking, articulated by Benjamin as a "flash" – its revelatory power suspending, or standing out from, the dynamic of the dialectic.

**Distanciation:**

Distancing effect / Estrangement effect: as relating to concepts devised by Bertolt Brecht, identifying strategies implemented within an artwork, across a wide range of media forms, designed to activate the viewer/audience through some form of distancing or alienation often achieved through the confounding of expectation and the employment of tactics such as shock, provocation and discontinuity etc. Equivalent strategies were established in Soviet theatre, including through the work of Sergei Tretyakov.

**Double articulation:**

Gilles Deleuze's and Félix Guattari's (1988) conception identifying two layers contributing, or working together – within an action that functions as double articulation – to form the substance and structure of matter. The example of sedimentation and layering, as applicable to the formation of rock, serves as an analogy for manifestations of double articulation at work, for example, within the formation of understanding – as related, reflexively, to the form and matter of a book. The mechanically suggestive action of the term is visualised through reference to an image of a double articulated claw of a lobster.

**Eidetic (science) (memory):**

Eidetic science, as derived by Barthes from eidetic memory (a term employed within phenomenology by Edmund Husserl and which equates, as a less directly accessible idea, to *photographic memory*, or *total recall*) and applied within his articulation of perception and understanding as a process originating in the mind, in mental images. The term is used to

suggest that perception is sparked by memory and to emphasise the equivalence, in terms of detail and vividness, between a mental image and a photograph.

**Entanglement:**

A key term used by Karen Barad to describe the coming together of the material properties of human and non-human matter within flows of matter. The term expresses interrelations and interdependencies of matter, manifest within a merged conception of nature and culture, that create *agency* or form phenomena.

**Entropy:**

This term is used as interpreted and applied by Robert Smithson in commentary within and on his various artworks. Smithson saw the earth and the matter from which it is comprised as being in a persistent sense of expansion or decay, endlessly moving towards, in terms of energy, a dissipated state of equilibrium. The prime example that underpins his conception is the expansion of the universe. Smithson's use of the term interprets the second law of thermodynamics proposed by German physicist Rudolf Clausius.

**Epoché:**

In concert with Barthes appropriated ***eidetic science***, Husserl's related notion of *epoché* advocates an approach to the perceiving and understanding of a phenomenon pursued without influence of assumptions or existing beliefs. The systematic nature of this phenomenological mode of thinking, within which biases or preconceived ideas are rejected, attains, as a (psychological) process of understanding, a basis in science – and therefore offers a claim of objectivity. *Epoché* is also known as *bracketing*.

**Essence:**

*Essence*, as derived from Aristotle and philosophy, is also a term or notion often invoked within discussion in the sphere of photographic and art theory within attempts to identify the essential elemental, or ontological, nature of a thing, or of a photograph. In the context of this thesis, the term is used as applied, for example, generally by James Elkins (2007, 2011), questioningly by Roland Barthes (2000) and critically by Geoffrey Batchen within his return to the origins of the medium (1999).

**Formalism:**

Used as an alternative term to modernism to identify an emphasis on form, over and above content, within the creation and appearance of photography, art and architecture. As manifest

in Soviet Constructivism and work, in a variety of media and contexts, produced at the Bauhaus art school in Germany in the 1920s and 30s, as championed, for example, by László Moholy-Nagy.

**Historical materialism:**

Originated in the theory of Marx, *historical materialism* relocates the emphasis of history to the experience, in material terms, of class and labour. This conception, applied within his critique of capitalism, rejects the notion of history as progress. Historical materialism has been variously reinterpreted and reapplied within theory – including by Benjamin, as noted in the thesis. Benjamin's usage, in *Theses on the Philosophy of History* in particular (as in Löwy, 2005), suggests the redemptive potential of history – bringing the material reality of experienced history (of the losers in history) into the present. Past experience so redeemed, in the present, achieves revelation oriented towards a future, thus disrupting the dominant linear conception of history (that favours the winners in history).

**Index (Indexicality):**

Appears in the thesis as derived from André Bazin's use of the term within his essay, *The Ontology of the Photographic Image* (1960). Used within photographic discourse to assert the direct connection between film negative or photograph and the reality of the thing photographed. The term, as it applies to analogue photography, also implicates the process that provides this indexical connection – such as: the action of light that bounces directly from the object into the camera and onto the film, or the projection of light from a photographic enlarger that passes through a film negative onto photographic paper. Such equivalence, in these terms, is often expressed citing the comparative analogous example of a fingerprint – the action of printing resulting in a direct and unique trace of the skin at the tip of the finger that was printed.

**Intra-action:**

Used by Barad, in combination with ***entanglement***, to further articulate relationships between human and nonhuman matter (within a merging of nature and culture). Intra-action describes the dynamic process, operating between matters, that produces ***agency.*** Agency in this context is a consequence of a coming together, of matters, within entanglement. This articulation proposes that agency is not the property of individual matters but is instead a dynamic produced through extension of materially, as generated through intra-action. This emphasis on flow, as opposed to fixity, suggests that absolute objectivity, including within the scientific enquiry of quantum physics, is not achievable.

**Large-format:**

A large size of sheet film, measuring 5 x 4 inches or above, used within professional (analogue) photography. The larger the size of originating negative (or direct positive) the greater amount of detail that can be recorded. Therefore, large prints made from large-format sheet films retain fine detail. In black and white photography, this is because, within the making of a print, the individual particles of silver halide chemical that coat the emulsion of the originating sheet negative and which form the grain that holds the image, are not subjected to the same degree of enlargement as they would be in the making of a print from, for example, a 35mm format film negative, produced at the same size.

**Materialism:**

Applied generally within the thesis to identify emphases, within historical and contemporary theory and practice, on the materialities of things. Such philosophical positions affirm the state and significance of matter and materialities over human consciousness and subjective influence. Materialism is therefore a way to knowledge, rather than something knowledge is projected upon.

**Materiality:**

Recognises things in terms of their essential base form as physical matter comprised of particular properties of specific materials and existing in a particular physical state. The thesis extends this definition, in line with conceptions of matter cited by scholars aligned with new materialism and by the thinking of Tim Ingold. This extension lends emphasis to the properties of materials of apparently invisible or abstract *things* – such as air.

**Matter:**

The basic constituent of all things and possessing properties that contribute to a thing's materiality, as outlined above.

**Nature:**

Nature is an important term to the study given its centrality to philosophical and new materialist ideas concerning the relationship of nature to ***culture***. Nature in this respect refers to all things and phenomena in the physical world, the original formation and existence of which was independent from human agency or control. The extended re-conceptualisation of nature as pure matter is a key aspect of new materialist theory.

**New materialism:**

This term identifies a realm of theory and study that began to emerge in the early twenty-first century, consolidated around a core of academics, including Karen Barad, Jane Bennett and Manuel DeLanda cited within this thesis. Their collective thinking is identified as a 'turn' against the binary critique of post-modernism and structuralism – such as were premised on the pitting of ***culture*** against ***nature***. New materialism foregrounds the thinking of matter distinct or independent from culture as a strategy towards rethinking real world problems – within diverse fields such as feminism, ecology and (quantum) physics. New materialist approaches, re-thinking the relationship between nature and culture and removing the privilege of culture *over* nature, variously recognise the agency or vibrancy of matter.

**Nonsite:**

A term coined by American artist Robert Smithson used within the titling of particular examples of his work involving the presentation of matter gathered from specific locations (such as slag collected at site in the industrial landscape of Oberhausen) within gallery-based exhibitions. This term addresses the dislocation of matter from its site of origin to the artificial site of the gallery.

**Objectivity:**

In the context of knowledge, this term indicates (intent to reach) a balanced and truthful account of something – a view, or opinion, or sense of understanding, untainted by personal emotional or cultural prejudice. Amongst a wide range of other cultural fields, the term is used extensively within discussion of photography and photojournalism to suggest or question the relation to truth of documentary images.

**Ooid / oolite / oolitic:**

Terms denoting the geological constitution of rock (as applied in the thesis within description of the matter of Portland Stone), from shell and other fragments, and implicating processes of sedimentation taking place over the duration of geological epochs.

**Ontology:**

The term is applied within the context of its more general philosophical definition referring to the study of what exists. In this sense, as pursued within the thesis, a study seeking to define the properties of materials that come together – through various relations of matter or their agency – to form the nature of photography, becomes the pursuance of an ontological enquiry (seeking answers to ontological questions, such as: What is photography?).

**Phenomenology:**

Developed in the early twentieth century as a philosophy of experience – of the phenomena, material nature and appearance of things – emphasising perception and consciousness. It proposes that meaning, in human terms, is located within lived experience. Its key proponents, expounding similar though often diverging ideas, included Edmund Husserl, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Martin Heidegger. Much of Henri Bergson's thinking, as related in the thesis, was also aligned with phenomenological concerns. Philosophical ideas derived from *phenomenology* remain important to theory developed within the orbit of ***new materialism***.

**Phenomena / Phenomenon**

In Barad's new materialist terminology, a phenomenon is an entanglement of subject and object. This conception removes the separation between subject and object (as effected in pursuit of understanding), in effect refuting the idea of objective distance.

**Properties of materials:**

As applied by Tim Ingold, the term, stressing that the matter of a thing is comprised of specific properties, is used to counter to what he sees as the abstract term of ***materiality***.

**Punctum:**

As famously coined and applied by Roland Barthes in *Camera Lucida* (2000) to define a momentary acute ***affect***, in terms of emotional or psychological impact, of a photograph on an individual viewer. The key assertion made with regard to the specificity of this term and the action it signifies is that *punctum*, in the realisation of its affect, emanates from (shoots out from) the photograph. This is in opposition to the notion that such affect is projected onto the photograph by the viewer. Punctum's impact is described by Barthes as a 'wound' or a 'cut'. As applied and contextualised within the thesis and practice, is integral to this study's search for the *elusive subject*. The unpredictability of punctum contrasts the accompanying more sober and general affect of, ***studium***.

**Referent:**

As used within semiotics to identify a thing within, in the context of this study, a photograph (or in the real world) that is capable of being referred to by a viewer, within a process of interpretation discerning what that thing is or what it represents. In other words, the referent ***denotes*** what it is.

**Reification:**

A term occurring within the foundational citation of this thesis – in which Brecht outlines his criticism of photography with respect to its (in)ability to depict the real. Reification in these terms, as derived by Brecht from its Marxist origins, asserts that the complex and abstract nature of human relations (such as human labour) have, become conceived as material (or concrete) in the form (within Brecht's example) of a factory. Through its reductive action, reification thus denies, Brecht argues, deeper thought such as might achieve an accurate or reliable interpretation of reality. ***Reality***, in this sense, is something a photograph cannot show.

**The Real:**

As used with photographic and other discourse to emphasise the extent, of exactness or lack, of a representation's relationship to the reality of (the nature) it depicts.

**Representation (photographic):**

As generally applied within this thesis, representation defines the result of a photographic process – the relationship of the likeness of a thing as it appears in a photograph to its actual form and appearance in the real world. The term does infer that a change, in terms of what that thing might *denote*, has potentially occurred – and therefore points to social or political concerns (as determined by the culture the individual viewer brings to the nature of the photograph and of the reality depicted).

**Response-ability:**

As coined by Barad to articulate ***agency*** in new materialist terms in a way that acknowledges the potential of a mutual, *agential*, response within ***intra-action*** between human and non-human matter. This rethinking of agency accommodates and addresses imbalances of power (between nature and culture), thus re-configuring matter within intra-action. Agency in this context becomes an *enactment*. So defined, the notion of *response-ability* is proposed by Barad as an enlightened and constructive way of engaging with and addressing real world problems.

**Ruins-in-reverse:**

A term coined by Robert Smithson, and which appears in his text piece *The Monuments of Passaic* (1967), used to conjure the idea that a construction site within the urban landscape is a site of future ruin.

**Series / seriality:**

Identifies the grouping of individual photographs to construct a sequence within which some sort of visual relationship between the images is established. The series and its dynamic of seriality can be formulated to operate in different ways, via, for example, repetition of the same essential subject (as in the work of the Bechers); the constructed presence, running through the series, of oblique or literal narrative elements or content; or, more abstractly, via graphic association. A series can offer two levels of reading – allowing attention to individual photographs as well as to particular relationships discernible between images arranged in linear, grided typological, and other forms of seriality.

**Semiotics / Sign:**

Variously formulated interpretative analysis (incorporating a range of terms) concerned with linguistics as well as images, as devised by Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Sanders Peirce (et al) and employed widely by a range of academics – including Roland Barthes (who later shifted towards phenomenological approaches to analysis, as practised in *Camera Lucida* (2000). Given the centrality of semiotics to interpretation and understanding based on culturally determined responses to nature (therefore encouraging a binary opposition between nature and culture), I have refrained from employing such modes of analysis within the thesis – although much of the simple logic of semiotic methodologies, centred on the notion of a system of understanding based on ***signs*** (and what those signs may signify etc.), is, the study accepts, relevant to the acquisition of knowledge.

**Spectacle:**

The brief reference to spectacle within the thesis is made in the context of Guy Debord's use of the term to denote the passivity of culture, as induced by the dominant ideology of capitalism – such dictated spectacle offering experience whilst also negating the potential for active critical response.

**Studium:**

Defined by Barthes in *Camera Lucida* (2000) as the general interest a viewer might find in the content and appearance of a photograph – an interest sufficient to attach the viewer, emotionally as well as intellectually, to the photograph, thus priming, within the photograph itself, the agency of ***punctum*** (as described above).

**Subjectivity:**

This term suggests personal psychologically oriented bias within perception and judgement. It is often used in relation to, or as a contrast with, the supposed balance or neutrality, in judgemental terms, of ***objectivity***. Subjectivity, in conjunction with objectivity, also suggests a process of interaction, shifting between the perceiving person and the thing perceived. Subjective viewing of a thing also brings power relations into play between the viewer (photographer) and the subject of their viewing. If the viewer's subject is a person, such power relations can strip that viewed person of their own subjectivity, thus, in a critical sense, objectifying them – in that they become the controlled, powerless and passive, object of the viewer's (photographic) gaze.

**Surrealism:**

A highly influential modern art movement, with political as well as artistic intent. Originating in the 1920s, its founder is generally acknowledged as André Breton. *Surrealism*'s alternative methods of perceiving or engaging with the world, influenced by dream states, the subconscious and chance, counter the limitations or strictures of ***realism***. Thus Benjamin, in response to Brecht's critique of photography's shortcomings with regard to reality, as quoted in the thesis, advocated surrealist approaches to representation as an effective way forward.

**Topography:**

The study of, in simple terms, the lay of the land – of forms and features evident within the landscape. Topographic concerns feature strongly within the wide genre of landscape photography – as simultaneously acknowledged and challenged in the exhibition 'New Topographics' (1975). Topography's regard for landscape, for the qualities of nature seen and the impacts of culture, is relevant to discourse centred on the work of both the Bechers and Smithson.

**Typology:**

In general terms, as applied with various disciplines, a *typology* is a form of classification, of things, based on type. As referenced in the thesis, this term relates to the grouping together of photographs, presented as grids, displaying types of industrial architecture (such as blast furnaces, water towers and lime kilns, etc.). Such classification opens the examples displayed to comparative study of the things depicted.

**Uncanny:**

This term is applied as derived from dominant definitions as developed by Ernst Jentsch Sigmund Freud in the early twentieth century. It is used in the thesis to suggest a sudden unaccountable feeling of strangeness or sense of emotional disorientation, experienced within encounter with a thing or place. In this context, for example, by myself as photographer encountering the blank masses of stone that comprise the nineteenth-century architecture of Sir John Soane. The uncanny is manifest as a momentary perceiving of the extraordinary, unusual or unexpected as being palpably present within essentially ordinary environments or acts of coming together.

**Vibrancy:**

This word has been adopted as a term within the new materialist-oriented writing of Jane Bennett, as referenced in the thesis, conferring on apparently inert matter the potential for activity independent of human intervention. The recognition of such agency, Bennet argues, can foster greater understanding towards solving problems impacting however abstractly on humanity, arising from the mutability of matter, and from the ever-shifting relationships between matters (within ecological and other events, such as are the result of direct or indirect human action).

## Appendix

Descriptive close readings, the product of *deep looking*, as defined and applied relevant to the thesis text and practice.

**Description One:**

***The Bridge Monument Showing Wooden Sidewalks*, Robert Smithson, 1967.**

**Fig. 26:** *The Bridge Monument Showing Wooden Sidewalks,* as published in: *The Monuments of Passaic*, Robert Smithson, *Artforum* (Vol.6, No.4, December 1967), p.49.

Not quite fitting with Smithson's highly subjective account of his encounter with this first monument, the photograph of the bridge that appears in published article has a sense of considered, balanced even, formality to its composition that serves to organise and make sense of its subject. The text that follows seeks to open this photograph through the distance of description.

The photograph is taken from the middle of a wooden walkway that runs along the edge of the bridge. This eye-level view looks straight ahead along the walkway and into the distance, towards the far bank of the Passaic River. The angled lines of the inner and outer limits of the walkway – with the main metal construction of the bridge to the left and a metal balustrade to the right – almost converge dead centre about three-quarters of the way up the photograph (the walkway coming to an end just before this illusion is achieved). The walkway itself thus forms a triangle, its base being the width of the bottom of the image, its pinnacle slightly truncated by the end point of the walkway. Columns of metal criss-crossed with struts and linked by heavy wire braces recede and overlap into the distance on the left-hand side of the walkway – breaking the left-hand edge of the triangle described above. These metal columns are cut by the top of the frame. The form of the metal balustrade to the right of frame is delineated and echoed by shadow that casts a compressed outline of its form evenly along the receding length of the wooden walkway, patterning that side of its triangular form. Smithson's camera has the sun in front of it, out of frame, higher in the sky, somewhere off to the right. The light catches the top of the balustrade, emphasizing the tonal contrast of the highlight of this plunging line against the distant shadowy space that occupies the angled section of frame in the top right-hand corner. This is the space below the bridge beyond which is a tangle of dark bushes and trees. In this small section of the image a glimpse of water can be seen framed by vague structural forms, including what appears to be a wooden mooring post. The roadway of the bridge itself can be seen to be an open metal grating, just as Smithson had described. The vanishing points of perspective allow the other side of the roadway to angle into the photograph on the left in the top third of the frame. The narrow wooden planks of the walkway are laid horizontally, parallel to the bottom of frame. They quickly recede into a compressed jumble of lines. At the top of the photograph, beyond the end of the bridge and beyond the tangle of trees, is a shallow vee of white sky. Against this small section of sky can be seen

a metal lamp fitting jutting out from a distant metal column and a tall thin post, the function of which cannot be identified with any degree of accuracy. The bridge is empty of traffic and empty of people. Smithson aims the gaze of his camera towards the other end of the bridge, directly along the pathway in the middle of which he stands and along which he could walk. This potential for movement increases the sense of Smithson's presence behind the camera. The distant horizon seen also offers a point of entry for a person to cross – at some point in the future, not recorded on Smithson's film. The direction of this absent travel, vertically into and out of the frame, crosses the almost completely unseen horizontal flow of the river beneath the bridge. In Smithson's terms, one metaphor of time is crossed by another.

The ordered geometries described above are contradicted very slightly by the visible sense that the subject is not quite straight within its square image frame (given Smithson's hand-held operation of the camera, this small inaccuracy is not surprising). Thus, the wooden plank of the walkway that runs along the base of the image is not quite parallel to this bottom edge of frame, instead narrowing on the left-hand side. The whole structure appears to lean very slightly to the left. The very slight imprecision seems important – and in keeping with Smithson's self-proclaimed (in the *Passaic* article itself) "snapshot" approach. The photograph thus sits between the formal conventions of professional documentary photography and the less precise forms of amateur photography. It sits also between the two poles of artistic expression and photographic record.

**Description Two:**

***The Sand-Box Monument (also called The Desert)*, Robert Smithson, 1967.**

**Fig. 27:** *The Sand-Box Monument (also called The Desert)*, as published in: *The Monuments of Passaic*, Robert Smithson, *Artforum* (Vol.6, No.4, December 1967), p.51.

The photograph is taken from eye height and shows the sand box at a certain distance. The depicted view looks across a sandy play area in front of a grassy park lined by scrubby bushes at the very top of the frame. If the photograph is divided into four equal horizontal strips, then the heavily foreshortened form of the sand box fits easily within the third strip – if counting from the bottom of the frame. The bottom half of the photograph, if seen in isolation, could have been taken at the edge of sand dunes – in a view perhaps looking towards the sea. A narrow trail – imprinted in the sand by some anonymous dragged object – curves across and cuts the horizontal mid-point of frame to the right of the sand box. In the foreground, emanating from the bottom left-hand corner, are

clumps of grass that spread out and encroach into the sandy lower half of the frame. The square form of the sand box itself is viewed square on, onto one of its four sides. Judging from its scale in comparison with other elements contained within the photograph, I estimate the width and length of the sand box to be approximately eight feet and the height of its surround about fourteen inches. The light comes from the rear on the left-hand side – the angle of its shadow pronounced but not excessively long. A neat triangle of shadow is attached the right-hand edge of the sand box's wooden frame – extending the angle of this side as it appears in the receding perspective of the view. The front edge of the surround is in shadow – but the shadow does not appear to extend frontwards onto the sandy ground that spreads around the sand box. A clear line thus delineates the outline of the illuminated sandy surface against the darkened surface of the containing surround. The foreshortened view of the sand box allows only a narrow strip of sand to be seen within it. The dark of shadow cast from the height of the left and top surrounds impinges on this view – but the sand that is in the light appears to be the tonal equivalent of the sand that covers the bottom half of the frame. The average level of the sand is around six inches higher than the level of the sand covered ground. The top horizontal quarter of the image shows the space of the park beyond the sand box. Here, scrubby grass extends up to the line of trees at the very top of frame. This receding area of grass is bisected by two paths. One curves gently across the frame a little beyond, in this foreshortened view, the shape of the sand box. The other enters towards the top on the left-hand side of the photograph and angles across the frame, connecting with the right-hand edge a little lower down – thus, in this perspective view, a little closer to the camera. These two paths divide the grass into three irregular angled horizontal sections. In view immediately behind the sand box, set into the nearest section of grass merged into by the sandy surrounds of the sand box itself, is a low horizontal climbing frame. Its width and height appear to be, accounting for the receding view offered by the photograph, similar to that of the sand box itself. The metal poles of the sides of the climbing frame curve into its long horizontal section, a

vertical section supporting the middle of this simple structure, dividing it in two. Visually, this arrangement mirrors a similar division evident within the visible construction of the sand box – its front-facing panel also divided by a vertical element within its supporting outer frame. Near the right-hand edge of the photograph, situated on a line extending horizontally across from between the far side of the sand box and the base of the climbing frame are two other fixtures of the play area positioned side by side. These are two horse-like animal shapes perhaps made of moulded plastic, one lighter in tone than the other, fixed atop metal springs. The horses, short protuberances for handles extending from the sides of their heads, are angled slightly backwards, facing the near edge of the photograph. The worn area scuffed bare of grass around the sprung horses connects to that around the climbing frame. These abrasions, along with the footprints and curved track dragged through the sand, testify to a once active human presence – registering time once spent, at this site, by now absent children. In the top angled section of the playing field, roughly two-thirds of the way into the photograph from the left-hand side is a bench – again, empty of people. The bench faces forwards, looking across the top path that runs immediately in front of it, towards the low horizontal climbing frame and the sand box positioned below it in the photograph. The bench is crossed, on its right-hand side, by a tall circular topped climbing frame some distance in front of it, positioned within the middle section of grass. A smaller, lower, climbing frame mirrors the position of the tall one, on the opposite side of the photograph. These structures, like the other such objects within this field of view, have worn patches around them – scuffed presumable by the feet of children at play. The trunk of a tree to the immediate left of the bench is mirrored by that of another tree on the other side of frame. The position of the two vertical forms of these tree trunks roughly places them on receding perspectival lines that can be extended into the space of the photograph from the two sides of the sand box. The low horizontal climbing frame also fits approximately into this view – both it and the two trunks are shifted slightly to the right of the sand box. The trunks connect with the narrow dark line of

rounded bushes that run, in a very shallow curve, across the top of frame. These stand in front of the barest evidence of the built environment, seen in shadowed glimpses, that extend outwards beyond the top of the photograph.

**Description Three:**

A photograph (***untitled***) from ***BANK***:

A further experiment enacted with the aim of opening the photograph described through descriptive close reading, the result of applied deep looking.

**Fig. 28:** *Untitled*, from *BANK*, Ian Wiblin (2010 to 2020), analogue colour photograph.

The photograph is square. It contains within this square six shapes that have a relation to the dimensions of a square – though none is exactly square. These shapes are different sizes and differently related to each other within the space of the photograph. They unevenly orbit around the photograph's empty centre. The whole area of the photograph shows a surface. An uneven, evidently textured surface of worn grooved stone. The viewpoint is angled – looking

slightly to the right and very slightly down, rather than straight ahead. Only the upper central area of the photograph appears absolutely sharp – the sharpness falling off into blur towards all four sides. Blur is more evident towards the vertical edges of frame, markedly so on the right-hand side. The bottom of frame also drifts towards softness, while the mid-point at the top of frame seems just about sharp – conveying a relatively crisp sense of rough texture. The colour of the photograph seems odd – not seeming to imitate the colours of the thing photographed with any degree of accuracy. This colour is near to being monochrome – dominated by a purplish brown hue. The six shapes, though of a similar hue, are markedly lighter in tone. The square of the photograph is vertically traversed by closely spaced lines. These appear to mark out shallow curved grooves cut into the surface of the stone. The delineations they make lean slightly from left to right – echoing the slightly leaning gaze of the camera. The grooves, in this framing, are thus at their widest on the left-hand side, becoming increasingly narrow and compressed towards the right. Despite the narrow range of focus, the grooves are still perceptible at the extremes of frame. The depth of the grooves is delineated by shadow caused by soft light seemingly coming from the right-hand side. There are forty-two complete vertical grooves contained within the width of the photograph – with some additional partial lengths angling in on the right-hand side, towards the bottom of frame. This is the darkest area of the photograph, which is slightly vignetted – darker at all four corners and brighter in the centre and towards the top of frame. If the six rectangular shapes are described, locating their position in relation to the centre of frame, as if on a clock face, then they are roughly situated at two, three, five-thirty, eight-thirty, ten o'clock and eleven-thirty. The rectangle at eleven-thirty is the largest and also the only one positioned in an area of the photograph that is sharply focused. The shape is wider than it is tall. It accommodates eight vertical grooves cut into to it in a way that aligns with the grooves that extend above and below its form. The defined detail in this area of the photograph suggests the implanting of this rectangular section of stone material into the similar stone material that

surrounds it and the other five shapes, and which fills the frame. A thin crisply defined crenelated line runs along the top of the rectangle, its darkness either the result of shadow cast into a slight indentation left from the incision and implanting of the shaped stone, or from discolouration perhaps caused by trapped rainwater and dirt. More pronounced sections of discolouration or shadow mark the bottom edge of the rectangle. A gap of two grooves separates this rectangle from the one, roughly half its size, to its left. This rectangle is of a similar but rotated aspect ratio and has a width of four grooves. Its top is aligned horizontally at a height between a third and half-way down the vertical dimension of the larger rectangle. Below this rectangle is a slightly larger one of a similar aspect ratio. These two shapes are aligned on the left-hand side - the larger one overlapping by one groove width on the right-hand side. The gap between the two rectangles equates to about half the height of the smaller one. Both these shapes are softly blurred, the bottom one with slightly more pronounced discolouration around its edges, particularly around its right-hand and bottom extremes. The two rectangles to the right of the sharply defined one at eleven-thirty are the most blurred – progressively so into their side of frame. Although regular rectangles, these shapes are the most distorted by the angled point of view from which they were photographed. The lines of their top and bottom edges, if extended, would eventually converge, in accordance with this perspective view. The shape at two o'clock, in its foreshortened form, is of a similar size but opposite orientation to the sharply defined shape to its left, at eleven-thirty. It is traversed by seven grooves. The top left-hand corner of the second shape on this side of frame is located below and one groove to the right of the bottom right corner of the rectangle at two o'clock. Its top is aligned just below the bottom edge of that rectangle. The bottom right corner of this small patch of inserted stone, of four grooves width, appears slightly more rounded. Being furthest to the right, this shape, within its photographic representation, is the most blurred. The sixth shape, positioned at five-thirty, is the most irregular, its bottom right corner indented, creating an obtuse angle of two short additional sides. The left-hand edge of this shape aligns, with a

space of one groove width, with the right side of the large sharply defined rectangle at towards the top of frame, at eleven-thirty. It is, however, adrift by a measure of two whole heights of that larger rectangle. This shape is thus the most isolated, situated about a fifth of the way up the height of the frame from the bottom – and slightly the right of centre. The centre of frame at this point is marked by a vertical strip of three groove widths that traverses the whole height of the photograph, the grooves delineated leaning slightly to the right – so that the point where the strip meets the top of frame is, correspondingly, slightly further to the right. This strip of more lightly coloured surface is not marked out by any cut lines, such as marks out the six shapes. The strip is at its brightest in the centre of frame – the void space of the imaginary clock face. ...

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