Time and Materiality in photography

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Art

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Abstract

This MA thesis *Time and Materiality in photography* focuses on image-making in a natural environment and on the project *Hraun* shown at the graduation exhibition at Gerdasafn Museum from 16. April- 16. May 2016. I write about several art projects and experiments that I have conducted in particular settings in the Icelandic landscape and contextualize with examples from other artists works (eg. Lisa Oppenheim, Jochen Lempert, Lorna MacIntyre, László Moholy-Nagy, Anna Atkins, Evariste Richer and Dove Allouche). In making the field-based works I draw on my background in photography and my knowledge and understanding of the medium as a contemporary image-making tool. One of my main interests is photography’s relation to time, materiality and surface. In the field-based works my intention has been to challenge the sealed of two-dimentional surface of photography by treating light-sensitive photographic paper like a sculptural material.

Using light sensitive photographic paper in direct contact with the landscape, the information of the surroundings is making the image. This process is linked to photograms where (traditionally) objects are placed on a light sensitive surface, then exposed to light. In this thesis I will focus on works made without the use of a camera and questions in relation to time and materiality in photography. To do this I draw in some thoughts on the surface in photography raised by James Elkins in *What Photography Is*¹ and Alva Nöe’s considerations on *timelessness* and *temporal extent* put forward in *Experience of the World in Time* in the book *Varieties of Presence*². In order to frame these viewpoints on time and materiality in photography, I make a sketch of the different voices in the discourse around photography in modernism and postmodernism, utilizing the book *Burning with Desire – a conception of photography* by Geoffrey Batchen³. Finally I write about my most recent project *Hraun* and put this project in relation to contemporary artists who’s work are connected to the methods and subjects that I am engaged with.

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Introduction

This thesis focuses on my work with image making in relation to the Icelandic landscape. Through recent work and experiments I will explain how my interest in re-materializing the making processes of photography has led me to work with a process linked to photogams. My background for working with photography and landscape is most strongly influenced by participating in the program Land Arts of the American West at University of New Mexico, US, where I for a six-month period lived and worked directly in the landscape. In this period I visited the famous land art pieces like Robert Smithson’s Spiral Jetty, Michael Heizer’s Double Negative, Nancy Holt’s Sun Tunnels and Walter De Maria’s Lightning Field that made a great impact on me. Through being in open desert areas and encountering these Land Art pieces, I experienced how the vastness of the landscape and a sense of extended time moved into my artistic work and thinking. This led me to studies of phenomenology, where the bodily experience of being in a place is central and it changed my working method from being largely lens-based to include more material elements, such as working with photographic paper as sculptural material.

1 Time in photography

Photography captures a moment in time. The camera is a mechanical devise where aperture and shutter speed control how much light is let in and for how long. Time is thus an inherent element in photography. But the desire photography has to hold on to a moment, to preserve time, is something that can be in opposition to how we experience the flow of time. In our normal conscious life, we are in a more or less precise experience of time. It is only when time is framed for a certain situation, that we have a focused sense of countable moments; hours, minutes and seconds.

In my work I am interested in extending the experience of time. I am trying to bring out durational aspects of time in images, which is rather contradictory to the medium of photography that stops time. So how can you play with the frozen moment of photography? There are different approaches to this question: You can construct a setting where the decisive moment is framed by long periods of observing time, as Jørgen Leth describes:

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1 A photogram is an image made by placing an object directly on light sensitive paper and exposing it to light. A photogram is made without a camera.
2 See image list # 1-4
When we go out [to work in the field] it is in order to set up traps for reality, it is to lure it into the frame, which we have arranged. We are calm, attentive, hesitant. Things happen when they will happen. [...] we trust the unlimited gifts of chance, but we might not have placed ourselves in a completely random setting.  

As Leth here makes clear, the decisive moment can be enveloped in periods of extended time.

Another approach, which is at the core of my project, is to remove the camera and just use light sensitive paper. In this case it is the passing of time that creates the image. The making of an image is normally controlled by the mechanical mechanisms of a camera. When using unfixed photo-paper, the control is given to the paper, the ambient light and the setting. It is the artist’s choice to stop the making process. This process will be explained more in depth in chapter 2.1.

1.2 Geological time and experienced time

Working with photography in Icelandic nature has put time and scale into focus in my work. By observing the physical layers in a rock the tension between the geological time-scale and the biological time-scale becomes very striking. Spending time in remote areas has allowed me to experience time as something radically different from normal time in an urban area. This might sound obvious, and it is, but the crucial difference for me is to experience it as part of my working process and not only to know it as an abstract concept. You can say that the physical layers of geology concretize and make time tangible. The time it takes a rock to erode put in relation to human lifetime shows the big contrast of time-scale. We can perceive the human life as a time-line with a beginning and an end whereas the geological time-scale is beyond our comprehension of perceived time. Working in the field in Iceland these different time-scales collapse and create a feeling of layered time. It expands the notion of what time is and put ephemerality of human life into perspective.

Petrology is a branch of geology that researches and establishes the chemical composition of rocks. The formation of a rock is from the beginning an active process that continues to develop throughout the life cycle of a rock. Normally we think of stones as dead, but on a

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1 Leth, Jørgen: *Det Uperfekte Menneske*, Gyldendal, Denmark, 2006, p. 45
microscopic level they are in constant growth. This is a process that happens over a very long period of time and is of course not visible to the eye. The many gas holes in a lava stone signifies that it is a ‘young’ stone and the chemical processes will eventually fill out the holes with encrustations and make the surface smooth. So a rock is not still, as we normally think, but animated by invisible and active chemical processes. The earth is thought to be around 4.600 billion years old and the oldest strata of Iceland above sea level are 15 million years old. Thus in terms of geological time scales Icelandic rocks are young⁴. As it appears from the above, my work with photography in the Icelandic nature has opened up questions relating to both time and time-scales and to the chemical processes in nature and in photography. These connections will be further elaborated in chapter 2.2.

2 Working with photograms

Normally a photograph has a motive and a smooth sealed off surface that is not meant to be touched. This tends to create a distance to materiality in the reception of the photographic image. It is this convention that I challenge in my work and that has led me to work with light-sensitive paper directly in the landscape, using a method that is linked to photograms. The very first photographic images made by William Henry Fox Talbot were photograms⁵. Talbot coined them photogenic drawings. Anna Atkins, Man Ray and László Moholy-Nagy⁶ are the most famous historical examples of artists working with photograms. It is a simple method of placing objects on photosensitive material, exposing it to light, processing, washing and drying them.

2.1 In the studio

In the following I will describe my recent studio experiments with light sensitive photographic paper. Working with photo-paper in the studio I have placed rocks on top of

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⁶ See image list # 9-12
light sensitive paper\(^7\). When I removed the rocks after some time an imprint of the shape of the rocks emerged. The longer I left the rock on the paper, the denser the shadow image of the rock became. Some photo paper I left with a rock on top in the studio for several months, others for just a few days. Since I don’t fix the photo paper and since the mechanical mechanism of a camera is no longer constructing time, the frozen moment is dissolved into a continuum of time. Last year I worked with a brand of light-sensitive black and white paper that turns blue when it is taken out of the package and is ‘developed’ by ambient light\(^8\). This semester I have experimented with different kinds of paper and every brand with its specific chemical composition gives the paper different colours when exposed to daylight. The colours are all chalky, ranging from blue, to greenish, brown, violet, yellow, pink and purple. I have tried to fix them, but the fixing chemicals strip away the colour, because the light-sensitive silver compounds in the paper, have already been destroyed by taking them directly out of the package. So the only way to capture a certain colour in the process is to take a picture of the paper.

To work with unfixed photograms raises questions about the reading of the work. The ephemerality of the imprint that will eventually disappear goes against the classical reception of photography as a finished and fixed piece. A photogram that is in process is perhaps more like a performance or a fluxus act. In terms of how to exhibit photograms, I have experimented with unfixed photographic paper in process, photographed photograms on slide film, and printed them on paper. They are all different expressions of working with photograms and in each case I have tested out what these further processing layers adds to the work, such as scale, material, method of installing etc. The time aspect in the making of photograms (whether in the landscape or in the studio) has opened up a wider sense of materiality in my work and through these experiments I have come to realize that materiality is a central part of how I find it exciting to work with photography. I’m thus interested in finding a way for time and materiality to come together.

Lorna McIntyre is a Glasgow-based artist whose work mainly deals with materiality through sculptural installations and photography. A work from 2012 with the title ‘Morning’\(^9\),

\(^7\) See image list # 5-8  
\(^8\) See image list # 13  
\(^9\) See image list # 14
consists of a series of photograms, with rhythms of lines on a cyanotype print. These photograms (76x56cm), installed directly and unframed on a wall, bring forward the tactility of the paper surface. They enter into a dialogue with more sculptural elements in a carefully composed installation setting. McIntyre’s work was recently part of an exhibition at Street Level Photoworks in Glasgow. The exhibition title was _Surface Tension_ and the works in the exhibition all point to the sensory possibilities of the photograph and focus on artist’s practices that are grounded in the material reality of photographic processes, which is an imaging technique very different from that of a camera lens. To me the question of surface in photography is important to consider, because the different materialities that bring out the surface of the image seem to have an inherent feeling of time.

2.2 In the landscape
In the following I will describe my projects and experiments with photograms that I have made directly in the Icelandic landscape.

**Imprint 1 (Lake Thingvallavatn, Iceland, 2014)**
The first experiment I did with connecting light sensitive photographic paper and landscape was in Thingvellir 2014. Thingvellir is part of a fissure zone running through Iceland, being situated on the tectonic plate boundaries of the Mid-Atlantic Ridge. It is therefore a place with highly geological activity and at the same time a place of historical importance in Icelandic culture and history.
Furthermore the oldest democratic parliament in the world – The Althing was established in Thingvellir in 930. In 2004 Thingvellir became a world heritage place. So being an iconic cultural and historical, and in turn, touristic place, it is probably one of the most photographed places in Iceland.
The project evolved around found postcards depicting the rift valley at Flósagjá. The found postcards were handmade silver gelatine prints from around the 1920’s, where the old

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11 See image list # 15-16
glass-plate photographic technique was used.

In the beginning I was concerned about how I could make a project in this massively photographed place and so I started to work with photograms. I wanted to get a direct imprint of the place rather than a realistic and easily recognizable photo. Taking my point of departure in the motive of the found postcard, I went to the place where it was taken and worked directly in situ with submerging unexposed photographic paper into Thingvallavatn. The rift-valley lake has emerged through the high volcanic activity in the area and is known for its clarity with a visibility up to 100 m and very blue water. The crack widens approx. 2.5 cm each year and is hereby a visible time-measure\textsuperscript{13}. Making these photograms in this water was an attempt to work with landscape images without making a representation of the landscape. The imprints made on the paper are chemical reactions to the ambient light, the water of the lake with its high concentration of algae and the weather condition of the winter day they were made (snow and frost). They can be considered as documents of the lake, a reaction between the chemical connections of the water and the chemical surface of the paper and the general impact of the surrounding environment. Thus they depict an underwater perspective of the lake. The result was organic abstract forms in bluish purple colour tones. As the photograms can’t be fixed (this strips the colour away) I photographed the photograms in the studio on slide-film and showed them as a projection in life-size scale (170x90cm), so that the viewer can perhaps have an imaginary experience of immersion into the element of water.

The project is entitled \textit{Imprint}, because it touches upon various kinds of imprints and materializations in the work. The photograms are direct imprints of the lake and the surrounding environment and further more the perception of the images leave an imprint in our mind.

Lisa Oppenheim is a New York based artist who works with re-materializing photography and film utilizing conceptual methods. A lot of her work includes appropriated documentary images or other sources of already existing image material. In a work entitled \textit{Lunagrams} from 2010\textsuperscript{14} Oppenheim works with the idea of an imprint. She borrowed mid-nineteenth

\textsuperscript{13} ibid.
\textsuperscript{14} See image list # 17-18
century glass-plate negatives from the archives of New York University depicting the moon. She then made large-format negatives from the glass-plates, placed the negatives on a photographic paper and exposed them under the moonlight at the exact same time as the moon-phase depicted on the glass-plate negative. In using the moon as light-source she is conceptually and literally collapsing the motive of the image with the making process. By establishing a making process that mimics the motive of the glass-plate negative, she brings in a sensation of authenticity to the motive through letting the real moonlight develop the negative of the moon. For me her interest in the direct contact with the natural elements (exposing paper in moon-light), has a similarity to Imprint, where the images of the lake where made in direct contact with the water of the lake. I think that the authentic contact between the water and the paper intensifies the presence of the place in the images; the same logic as in Lisa Oppenheim’s Lunagrams.

**Imprint 2 (warm surface on Eldfell volcano, Oktober 2015)**

The second experiment I did with photo paper in direct contact with nature was on Eldfell volcano in mid November 2015. Eldfell is situated on Heimaey island off the south coast of Iceland. The volcano erupted in 1973, from January 23 to June 26. During the eruption the temperature of the lava was measured at 1030°C. Now 43 years after the eruption, there are still areas on top of the volcanic crater that have a subsurface temperature of up to 290°C. The heat comes from warm intrusions beneath the volcano that rises to the surface. You can feel the heat with your hand on the surface on certain spots, but it is only when you begin to dig under the surface that it gets extremely hot in some places. This information about the continuous heat intensity was the point of departure for the experiments that I made in three different locations on top of the volcanic crater. In the first experiment light sensitive paper was put for 5 minutes into a hollow space where heat was steaming up (the emulsion melted). In the second experiment the photographic paper was warmed up, briefly by the heat from the hollow space, but not left inside (the paper turned pink). In the third experiment a piece of photo paper was put ca. 10cm under a layer of earth, directly on a warm spot in the ground. The outcomes from these experiments are very different. The

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15 See image list # 19-21

papers that were in contact with the heat turned pink and the papers that were in contact with the ground became imprints of the earth rather than the heat. The photo-papers that turned pink have not been fixed, like in the previous experiments. However, the curious thing is that the colour does not change, like in the others. It is possible that the heat has fixed the paper. In biology for instance heat fixation is a common process that is used to fix an organism to a glass slide that then can be examined under a microscope\(^\text{17}\). At this stage I am not entirely clear if the photo paper was actually fixed from contact with heat, but since that time, no changes in colour have been registered in any of the photograms concerned.

Jochen Lempert is a Hamburg based artist whose work is closely connected to nature and whose photographic work evolves around human relation to nature. Originally trained as a biologist his photographic work intermingles scientific and artistic thinking. His photographs depict animal life and how we categorize and structure knowledge visually. In addition to his strong research based works, his work is also very poetic, quiet and has a strong sense of materiality. Lempert always works in black and white and makes his photographs himself in the darkroom\(^\text{18}\). A work from 2010, entitled *Glow worm (movements on 35-mm film)*\(^\text{19}\) are four images that were made by placing a strip of unexposed film on the counter of a sink (in a darkened bathroom) and then Lempert set a glow worm on the film-strip that moved over the film and exposed it, because the insect emits light (bioluminescence). The final images show a trace of light on a dark background. It is an abstract image but at the same time a direct imprint of the movements of the glow-worm. The experiment I did with exposing the light sensitive photographic paper to heat has a similar approach to Lempert’s method in the *Glow worm* photograms, that is a method of letting one substance affect another. Where Lempert uses a glow-worm to expose the film, I used heat to expose the light sensitive photo paper. Heat is the release of light (photons) in both the visible and invisible spectrum of light. In that way heat is connected to the roots of photographic substances.

\(^{17}\) Heithmarsson, Starri: "en.ni.is", Icelandici Institute of Natural History, accessed on: 13.01.2016 http://en.ni.is/botany/

\(^{18}\) Lempert, Jochen and Brigitte Kölle: *Phenotype*. Germany: Walther Koenig, 2013, p. 15

\(^{19}\) See image list # 22
*Imprint 3 (lava cave, Iceland, December 2015)*\(^{20}\)

In a recent experiment I have made photograms in a lava cave in Snæfellsnes, Iceland. Currently the project consists of nine photograms. The photograms are made in a lava cave that is situated inside a cliff that meets the Atlantic Ocean. The solidified lava tubes of the interior, make the deep geological layering of time concrete. The rugged surface of the walls and the floors of the cave reveal the chaos and roughness of how the cave came into being\(^{21}\).

The chemical composition of it’s interior is in a constant process of growing. In the cave it is dark, but not totally dark. From the entrance a bit of light shines through, but the faint light is not enough to be able to see where you are going. Because of the absence of light, I could treat the cave as a darkroom of sorts. I did not use artificial light to move around, but wanted to allow my eyes to adapt to the darkness. With me into to cave I brought silver gelatine paper, water and a tray (and two friends). There the paper was wetted in the tray, until the fibres had soaked up a good amount of water. In order to get an imprint of the lava flow the light sensitive emulsion side was pressed with my hands against the floors and the walls of the lava cave. The papers were then put into light-tight bags and brought back to the darkroom and developed. After treating the paper almost like a sculptural mold the developing process of the image was too different from a normal process. I poured the developing liquid over the paper and because of the three-dimensional effect of the paper, the developing is not even, but leaves some areas lighter than others, creating a landscape of different nuances of black and grey. So the images resulting from this process is made up partly of the marks from the rugged surface of the cave and the experimental developing process in the darkroom. The emulsion too got affected by minerals in the cave that has created different marks.

The paper dried into the creases and folds that were made in the cave. Transforming the paper into a three dimensional form allows me to draw attention to materiality and to the surface of the photograms. Focusing on the surface and the variation of black and grey nuances that are brought out in the developing process creates a depth in the surface, giving the photogram a sculptural form.

The project is an investigation into a place; in this case lava cave and also an investigation of treating photography in a sculptural way. The place in question is not directly visible in

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\(^{20}\) See image list # 23-24

\(^{21}\) See image list # 25-26
the photogram – what you see is simply a dark three-dimensional surface. Perhaps they can be seen as shadow images, an indirect image of a cave, that is both drawing references to the early cave-paintings and to the process of making itself. This hybrid between place and abstraction is a central part of my interest and investigation. The photograms explore photographic image-making as a direct physical meeting between (lava cave) and photographic material (silver gelatine paper).

Working in the darkness of the cave increases your senses. The increased sensitivity of the senses allows one to examine photography from a different angle. Working in the cave is similar to working in a darkroom, but with a different degree of control. By working without using the optical sense it could be said that I’ve turned myself into operating as an aperture, shutter speed and release button. My hands decide’s how much work each paper needs, before it is done. This is not a controlled mechanical method, as when using a camera, but rather it is up to chance how the photograms turn out, since I can’t see what my hands are doing. In that way these photograms question the control inherent in working with photography. One could challenge if this belongs at all to a photographic process? I claim that it does, because of the use of traditional photographic materials. Furthermore, staying within the frame of photography allows me to experiment within these limits and explore how far the limits of the medium can be stretched.

In researching different artists working with contemporary photography, I can conclude that there is a tendency in photography now to focus more directly on working with photographs as objects. The massive circuit of images and the major technological development in photography has challanged the use of photographs in an art context. Paper images are largely replaced by pictures from smartphones and everyday there are more than 350 million photos uploaded to Facebook (Facebook users have uploaded more than 250 billion photos in total, that is owned by Facebook)22. It is not surprising that many artists, including myself, seek new ways to work with photography as an artistic medium, where the tactile part of the medium is emphasized. I place my photographic work as part of this discourse of re-materializing photography. This is only one aspect of my practice, in other projects I have worked largely digital. The artists I have mentioned in the chapter ‘Working with

photograms’ have a studio-based approach and practices that focus mostly on still-life photographic processes. The context for the work I write about in this thesis is connected to field-based methods.

3 Modern and postmodern views on photography
In the following I will give a brief account for Modern and Postmodern positions in photography. The chapter is meant as a frame for discussing ‘surface’ as put forward by James Elkins in the book What Photography Is\(^23\), that follows this chapter.

In the book Burning with Desire\(^24\) by Geoffrey Batchen, Batchen introduces a number of critics on photography and their diverse and opposing views on what role photography plays in society and in an art historical context. I will draw out some major points put forward by the postmodern critic John Tagg and the modernist photographer and curator (at the Museum of Modern Art in New York from 1962-1991) Szarkowski.

The postmodern position by Tagg places the role of photography in a socio-political context, while Szarkowski talks from a modernistic view point that puts focus on the role of the medium and not on the ideas that has later surrounded photography. John Tagg states that photography has no identity and that a picture can be determined by context only. He argues that photography doesn’t have an identity of it’s own, because it is always attached to other discourses and therefore can’t be separated from those. Following this thought the meaning of a photograph is entirely dependent on the context you put it in and it’s therefore a medium that is particularly sensitive to context. He puts emphasis on the question: what does a photograph actually do in the world? And continues that photography can’t speak for itself, insisting that there can’t be any inherent meaning or qualities in a picture: it has no meaning without seeing it through the context it is supposed to function in.

Tagg takes on the view that photographs have no single true meaning and that a photograph is first of all based on and attached to political and social discourses\(^25\). He states: *Like the state, the camera is never neutral. The representations it produces are highly coded, and the power it wields in never its own*\(^26\).

\(^{23}\) Elkins, James. opcit.
\(^{24}\) Batchen, Geoffrey. opcit.
\(^{25}\) ibid. p. 2-12
\(^{26}\) ibid. p. 6
Tagg’s thoughts about photography as being an instrument of the state involved in power and knowledge structures, is based on Foucault’s structuralism. He strongly rejects photography as being a category of the in-itself, as he calls it, and concludes that photography belongs to every institution and discipline but its own. Another view of photography is put forward by Allan Sekula, who regards photography as an indexical sign. He takes his point of departure in Charles Sanders Peirce’s philosophy and looks at photographs in the frame of semiotics. He says that photographs are before all else indexical signs. To him a photograph, seen as an index, is the same as saying that photography is in its nature always a tracing of something else. So both Tagg and Sekula agree on the view that photography is indistinguishable from the institutions or discourses that choose to make use of the medium, but while Tagg focus on the political aspect, Sekula focus on language. Contrary to these views Szarkowski is interested in the intrinsic photographic qualities of the medium. He puts photography in the context of Western pictorial tradition and compares it to the classical painting tradition. His argument for doing this is that both the classical painting tradition and photography were from the beginning making use of camera obscura. Szarkowski uses a phrase the idea of contingency, that he explains as the ability of the camera to picture the world as a series of framed views. A photograph is determined by it’s fundamental function and characteristics as a medium. Furthermore Szarkowski argues that photography was not invented to serve a clearly perceived need but rather that it was, a result and a product of an artistic sensibility and experimentation. So his point is, that photography’s identity is not to be found in social-political discourse or in language, but emphasizes the context from which photography emerged and because of the camera obscura says that photography is so to be placed within art history. As will be seen in the following Elkins raises a radically different approach to photography.

3.1 Surface
In What Photography Is Elkins writes against Camera Lucida by Roland Barthes, in an attempt to find another sense of what photography is. He is particularly interested in figuring
out how to explain the surface of a photograph and what a focus on this element can 
elucidate about photography:

... When I mention the surface of a photograph, I mean surface and just surface, not 
elloquent surface: not hypostatic, fallen representation, crushed onto the sensitive layers of 
the photograph.29

Starting with this statement, the book sets out to re-investigate what photography is by 
firstly listing subjects that are often connoted with photography. Elkins provocatively states 
that he wants to say goodbye to all these aspects of photography. The list is rather long30:

- photography as social practice
- photography as a documentary practice, as evidence
- photography as mirror of the middle class lives
- photography as medium for constructions of race and gender
- photography as a political tool
- photography as visual culture
- photography’s relation to memory
- photography’s attempt to preserve the past
- photography’s relation to reality
- photography’s relation to time
- photography’s relation to representation

Elkins states that these aspects of photography have dominated for too long and that the 
surface of a photograph is something not many have written about. He describes Barthe’s 
Camera Lucida, as an overwatered plant in a conservatory31 continuing by saying that it’s 
too humanistic and sentimental, pointing out that photography is not only about light and 
loss, the passing of time, social investigation, but also about confronting a flat surface. He 
turns to the substances and material quality of photographs to see if such an examination can 
reveal what a photograph really is32. He wants to challenge the conventional way of looking 
at photographs and through looking at what a photograph on a material level consists of, he

30 ibid. p. 2-5
31 ibid. p. 5
32 ibid. p. 6
is offering a re-examination of the aspects of photography that are often overlooked in the
critical discourse around photography. So, what is it that Barthes *Camera Lucida* is not
confronting? Elkins says that Barthes simply ignores the material substances of photography
and only focuses on the object of desire. Elkins finds this one-sided and irritating and wants
to shift the focus to the process of seeing itself. For this thought experiment he uses a black-

ice-metaphor: He describes black-ice as this kind of ice that forms overnight on a lake. You
can try to look through the water, but you can’t see beyond the surface, because there is
nothing there to catch the light. It’s only when you walk on the surface of the black ice that
it cracks and breaks and then you can catch a glimpse of what’s underneath:

> [...] I look deeper, below it [the black-ice], searching for something to see: but there is
nothing definitely there beyond the flaws and frighteningly thin thickness of the nearly
invisible ice [...] there is no foothold, no certainty, no object33.

By using the black-ice-metaphor Elkins wants to focus on tactility as he says that this is
something that almost everyone has experienced with photography, but hardly thinks about.
When you hand someone a photograph, you are touching its surface. Furthermore Elkins
says your eyes can touch the surface of a photograph34. At the same time, he acknowledges
that a photograph shouldn’t be reduced to this, but to forget the surface of a photograph is in
a way also to forget the roots of photography. Selenite, salt and paper are compounds of
photography that is always ignored but at the same time always there.

In his writing Elkins focuses on photographs that show us things we would have preferred
not to see, or don’t want to see, don’t know how to see, or don’t know how to acknowledge

seeing35. He does this in order to find out whether you can look at an emotionally loaded
image, without being emotionally engaged. Elkins thus defies what Barthes called the

punctum. In Camara Lucida Barthes defines punctum in this way:

> A photograph’s punctum is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant
to me)36

Barthes describes the punctum as an arrow, which is a visual trigger that shoots towards and
hit the viewer. So, the punctum includes a certain pain, that rouses and wounds the viewer at

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33 ibid. p. 20
34 ibid. p. 26
35 ibid. p. 98
the same time. This approach to engaging with images, is based on a subjective pre-understanding of certain elements in the image. For instance in André Kertész Die Ballade des Geigers, Abony Ungarn (1921) Barthes denotes the dirt road as the punctum in the image:

*I recognize, with my whole body, the straggling villages I passed through on my long-ago travels in Hungary and Rumania*\(^{37}\)

In other words, Barthes understanding of images, generates emotional, psychological and physical responses. Opposite Barths, Elkins is not interested in images that are emotionally absorbing, dramatic or theatrical. Rather he is interested in images that are hard to see and hard to notice. He states that the flat surface, that doesn’t promise much pleasure in return, is also a part of what photography is (the substantial, technical and mechanical aspects). Throughout his book Elkins focuses on what most people don’t see in photographs, which he calls *a form of not seeing*\(^{38}\).

As I understand Elkins, he thus calls attention to our lacking ability to see the obvious: *we could look more, if we wanted to*\(^{39}\).

I agree with Elkins that there is a lack of attention to the surface in photography compared to when we consider materiality in other medias like painting and sculpture. However Elkins admits towards the end of the book, that he is not sure what his focus on the surface will bring about for the reading of photography. I find Elkins examination of the surface interesting, especially in relation my work with photograms where I am confronted with the chemical surface in a very concrete way. As I understand Elkins he attemps to reset our habits of looking at photographs. Although this seems rather illusory it’s an interesting aspect that may shed some new light on how we perceive a photograph.

### 3.2 Presence of time

In previous chapters (1 and 1.2) I have considered different experiences of time through my work in the Icelandic nature. I will now add some reflections on time in relation to my work by introducing Alva Nöe’s considerations on *timelessness* and *temporal extent* in the book

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38 Ibid. p. 118
39 Ibid. p. 123
Varieties of Presence\textsuperscript{40}. In the chapter Experience of the World in Time\textsuperscript{41} Noë gives an account of the experience of timelessness and the temporal through making a distinction between objects and events. I will draw out the main considerations in order to come to a better understanding of how my work relates to these different notions of time.

Noë sets out by analyzing how an object and an event is perceived differently in time. For this examination he uses a tomato as an example of an object and a classical concert as an example of an event. In examining the tomato as an object, Noë is interested in what we see and what we don’t see. For instance when we stand still and look at a tomato we can only see the front of the tomato, but we can get access to the back, because the tomato is actually there in front of us. By moving around it, we can see it from all sides. Even if we only visually see the front of the tomato, we still experience the tomato as having a back, because of our pre-understanding of the object. We […] experience something whose hidden parts are present but out of view\textsuperscript{42} as Noë puts it. In that way objects are whole and complete, although we can’t perceive the whole at once. They are also timeless, Noë says, because they have no duration in time, but exist at a particular moment of time.

Events are of the opposite nature. They unfold in time and are never whole, but are rather experienced as fragmented and temporal. Furthermore an event is fleeting in nature and is always going forward without offering any fixed moment in time.

Noë brings in an example of an event put forward by Sean Kelly, namely the experience of listening to an opera singer holding the same note for a very long time. What Noë wants to take a closer look at with this example, is the temporal extend of a sustained note\textsuperscript{43}. When listening to the singers sustained note, something happens in the listeners perception of the experience of time passing. Noë explains:

\textit{When you hear the singer’s sustained note, you not only hear the way it sounds now, but you also hear it as having temporal extent\textsuperscript{44}.}

So the extension of time in a note, makes one hear not only the note, but also the time it has taken for the opera singer to sing the note. Noë is aiming to understand why the extended

\textsuperscript{40} Nöe, Alva. opcit.
\textsuperscript{41} ibid. p. 75-81
\textsuperscript{42} ibid. p. 77
\textsuperscript{43} ibid. p. 76
\textsuperscript{44} ibid. p. 75
note of the opera singer sounds as if it has been going on for a long time. He continues to elaborate on this by explaining that an event is a construction of what has happened and what will happen. This relation to time in an event is in contrast to the timelessness of an object. The movement in the example of the tomato is perceptual - between the front of the tomato and the back of the tomato. So in the example of the object Noë is drawing attention to the implicit, what we can’t perceive. The singer holding the note, is in similar way implicitly drawing attention to the temporal structure of the event - the unfolding of time in relation to past and future.

In my view this experience of time described by Noë has some common features with my experiments with unfixed photograms. Instead of examining time through an extended note, I am examining time by letting light sensitive photo paper react to light over time. Through this I put change and nuances of colour into focus. If I let the papers be unfixed I allow the viewer to see a past and an imaginary future. By doing so I put the experience of time into focus. Like a listener has to concentrate and stay in the now, to get in touch with music, a viewer is likewise challenged to get in touch with subtle changes of visual information. In my work with unfixed photograms you can say that the photogram as an object is transformed into an event. The chemical process on the surface is in a continuous reaction with the surrounding environment and in this process time is visualized and the photogram becomes an event, like the opera singer holding a note.

In previous chapters (3-3.2) I have put my work into perspective through presenting different theoretical voices reflecting on photography in modernism and postmodernism and the experiences of time and materiality. In the photograms where I connect landscape and photography I see a relation to the modernist views proposed by Szarkowski concerning an examination of the intrinsic photographic qualities of the medium. The photograms could also be interpreted as an indexical sign as Allan Sekula says or the reading of them could be entirely dependent on the context they are shown in as John Tagg suggest. James Elkins approach to challenge one’s way of looking at and understanding photographs, has pushed me to test the limits of how I make photographs. At the same time I find his investigation disturbing and at times, too far removed from any reality, so Barthes more humanistic investigation’s becomes a necessary counterbalance. I connect Noë’s considerations on the

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45 ibid. p. 76
timeless aspects of an object, to my own experimentations with looking at a photograph as an object. His thoughts concerning time experienced in an event is furthermore bringing me closer to realize what it means to work with unfixed photograms. Furthermore my work could be placed in the context of Land Art and some might argue that my work raises environmental issues.

I have had many different responses during the last years about the context of my work, and I think it is interesting to be part of a time where the artworld is representing such a range of different voices and discourses. It might work for one project that I am borrowing elements from modernism and in another project it might work that I incorporate scientific data and yet in another I might have to wait and simply trust the unlimited gifts of chance. So using hybrid methods I am constantly trying to develop my artistic practice and choices according to my results.

4 Hraun

In the following I will reflect on the project Hraun shown at the IAA MA exhibition at Gerdasafn Museum, April 16-May 16 2016. The project entitled Hraun consists of 2 photographic series, a photogram and a video. The 2 photographic series are 11 silver gelatine prints measuring 50x60 cm 6 silver gelatine prints measuring 100x150 cm both showing lava rocks from a microscopic view. The video examines the surface of a glass plate negative depicting the rockwall in Almanagjá, Thingvellir. The glassplate negative was taken by Gunnhildur Thorsteisson and is today in the collection of the National Museum of Iceland. The photogram is shown in the installation as a floorpiece. It is a work made in a lava cave, measuring 100x90 cm, where I have worked with manipulating and shaping the chemical surface of the paper. In this chapter I will reflect on the process of making these works, the research behind them, and relate them to the main concepts of this thesis: time and materiality. Furthermore I will contextualize to the artists Evariste Richer and Dove Allouche who both work with the relationship between art and geology.

46 Leth, Jørgen. opcit.
47 See image list # 27, 28, 29, 30, 31
48 See image list # 34
49 See image list # 32, 33
4.1 Process and research
As shown earlier in this thesis my work has developed through field-based experimentation in the Icelandic landscape where I have primarily worked with photograms. In these field works I was making use of the chemicals within the photographic papers itself igniting a reaction between the chemical geology of Iceland and the photographic chemicals. These field based experiments led me to conduct the project Hraun, which is in line with the experiments described in this thesis, because of their conceptual connection to landscape, time, place and materiality.

The source material for the project Hraun are petrographic slides that are normally used for researching the chemical composition and internal structure of lava rocks under a microscope. A petrographic slide is used in petrology and optical mineralogy and is a thin slice of rock that is glued with epoxy onto a piece of glass and sanded down until it is transparent. The slides are a positive and the images made from the slides are negatives. They look like and have the same size as a 35mm photographic negative. During my exchanges with petrologist Kristján Jónasson I learned about the age of the rocks, the species on the slides and what place they come from. These information was not only very fascinating to me but also opened up to a new layer in understanding the rocks from a scientific point of view.

Evariste Richer is a Paris-based artist whose work relate to geology, geography and landscape. He is interested in natural phenomena and systems of measurements that science has developed to explain phenomena such as the aurora borealis, the green flash, the hail storms or the rise of sea level. He utilizes conceptual methods and many of his works incorporate photographic processes. In a photographic series entitled Micachrome (2012) consisting of 11 images measuring 172 x 123 cm, Richer enlarged mica sheets, using the transparent sheets of the rock as positive and enlarged the sheets onto Cibachrome paper - an analogue photographic technique using a polyester base paper which entails 13 layers of colour azo dyeing, which gives the final printed image physical depth and dimention. Using the flakes from Mica instead of a film transparency there is a very direct link between the rock and the image, like in my project Hraun. His interest in showing the internal microscopic view of the mica rock is similar to my project using petrographic slides

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50 See image list # 35, 36
51 See image list # 37
as negatives. Also the approach is similar in that there is no actual film or camera involved in the Micachrome series like in Hraun. Both the mica sheets and the petrographic slides are positives transferred to paper that then becomes the negative. Where the mica sheet is a flake of an already transparent rock species, the petrographic slide is lava has been through an elaborate process of transformation (sanding down of the rock) in order to make the rock transparent. Concerning installation choices, Richers images are classically framed with glass whereas I choose to show the images including marks from the process and unframed.

Another project related to Hraun is a series of physautotypes entitled Granulation (2013)\textsuperscript{52} by Paris-based artist Dove Allouche. This work uses an old photographic technique invented by Joseph Nicéphore Niépce and Louis Daguerre in 1832. The technique includes making the photographic solution out of lavender oil residue dissolved in alcohol that is transferred to a silver plate. For the project Granulation Allouche used images of the phenomenon ‘solar granulation’ from Atlas de Photographies Solaires by astrophysicist Jules Janssen as source material. The Atlas which he borrowed from the collection of the Observatoire de Paris, contains 30 images of the ‘solar granulation’ phenomenon. The images from the Atlas was made into sheet film by the artist which he then exposed according to the technique of the physautotype. Conceptually he merges the phenomenon of ‘solar granulation’ (light) with the making process which includes the reflection from the silver halloides.

The common characteristics of the works here mentioned are the use of scientifique and photographique techniques. In scientifique research the material (eg petrographic slides) is a concrete tool for research. In the image making process the scientifique material is transformed into an artistic language. How do these two fields communicate about the natural world we live in? Put into an artistic language the scientific tools are superimposed with a visual language that communicate the scientifique data differenty. The mix between the two different areas establishes a kind of double contract with the viewer, saying this is an art work, but it is a scientifique tool too.

\textsuperscript{52} See image list # 38
4.2 Text component and installation

The images in the exhibition was placed according to the scientific data: age, species and place. In that way the scientific parameters is put in the foreground whereas the pure aesthetic parameters are put in the background. The text components to the images had reference numbers and these numbers were used as a subtitle for categorizing them. For instance I put two images depicting gabbro rock species next to each other that were both 10 million years old, and three other images alongside each other that were all basalt lava with varying ages. In that way the text component became an integrated part of the work. The installation forms four groups. One group of 11 photographs installed as a serie. Another group of 6 images (150 x 120). The third group is a video piece and the last group a sculptural photograph placed on the floor. The installation has contrasting elements between horizontal and vertical orientations as well as the smooth surface and the sculptural. On some of the images white rings occur that are very different from the internal structure of the rock. These rings are not part of the rock, but bubbles in the epoxy glue that is used to fasten the specimens to the slide.

In placing the images in the installation according to a certain chronology bring the work into a methodology of systematizing and organizing knowledge. This structure guides the viewer into a scientific thinking. The text components connect the work to Icelandic geology and geography. Putting the images that are abstract in relation to concrete factual information creates a tension between what we know is real and what we experience with our senses. This is furthermore emphasized in not showing the source material in the exhibition – the petrographic slides – but instead through the enlargement of the petrographic slides show that the images are depicting an thorough leaving the edges of the glass slide visible in the image. This choice was made to relate the microscopic view of the lava rock to it’s existense as a petrologic tool too.

The tension between the scientific data and the sensory impression of the work points to a double-sidedness in perception. If you look at the work without any pre-understanding you will read it in a different way than if you know what it is you are looking at. The text component serves not only as factual scientific information, but also as a reminder that what you are looking at is a real object.
Choices
Here I will point out what I decided to include and what I decided to exclude and how I think those choices shape the perception of the work. The enlargements of the microscopic information of the slides put the span between microcosm and microcosm, which is inherent in the subject matter into play. At the same time the images are abstract enough to they leave plenty of space for a viewers imagination. Another choice was to make the source material visible (the petrographic slide) in the image. In that way the images are connected to the object that they were enlarged from. The tension between abstraction and objectification is central in the work. Therefore the source material, the petrographic slide, are visible in the images. This is emphasized in using heavyweight (255g/m2) fiber based silver gelatine paper (warmtone). The choice of black and white photography emphasizes the abstraction. The choice of analogue techniques instead of digital is because it is a process that gives weigh to the quality of materiality.

Conclusion
The core of the projects mentioned in this thesis revolves around perception of time and materiality. As mentioned the formation of lava rocks is from the beginning an active chemical process that continues to develop throughout their life cycle. In my projects I have been interested in connecting the chemical processes in geology to the chemical surface of the photographic paper. It started out by picking up a lava stone and very soon geology became an important part in the development of the projects mentioned in this thesis. Referring back to the writings by James Elkins on surface, one of his major points was that we have lost the ability to see, mainly because we tend to look beyond the surface. In his view when looking at photographs we often seek too quickly into meaning and abstraction, instead of dwelling at the surface we are looking at. I agree with Elkins that the lack of focus on surface in photography can occur a problem in the reading of photographs. If the surface we have in front of us is ignored and we move too quickly to the meaning of the work, the materiality of the work will disappear. With this project I have focused on the surface in different ways, aiming to bring tactility into my photographic work. When I started to make projects in Iceland I was struggling to find out how I could make images of the Icelandic landscape. Through studying lava stones and getting to know the
geology of Iceland I found an approach that works directly with the geological processes of the landscape and I am just in the beginning of developing my work within this frame. The next project I am going to conduct will be in the area Holuhraun where a group of 9 scientists from the Institute of Earth Sciences, University of Iceland, will be working. Here I will study the new lava field in order to elaborate on the project *Hraun*. 
Bibliography


Works used but not cited


*Spiral Jetty* is located at Rozel Point peninsula, by the Great Salt Lake in Utah. The piece was made using over six thousand tons of black basalt rocks and earth from the site.

The water of Great Salt Lake is pink, due to a red pigment in bacteria and algae that are in the high percentage of salt in the water (salinity 27%). Due to this the black basalt rocks are covered with salt crystals.

Image credits:
From the online image archive of the Land Arts of the American West, "http://landarts.org"


In the collection of Museum of Contemporary Art Los Angeles.

*Double Negative* is located in Moapa Valley on Mormon Mesa, Nevada. It consists of two long, straight trenches that Heizer excavated in 1969-70 moving 240,000 tons of sandstone and rhyolite rock.

Image credits:
From the online image archive of the Land Arts of the American West, "http://landarts.org"

In the collection of Utah Museum of Fine Art.

*Sun Tunnels* is located in Lucin, Utah. It consists of four large concrete tubes, laid out in an open X configuration. The tunnels are pierced by holes of varying size that correspond with the pattern of selected celestial constellations: Draco, Perseus, Columba and Capricorn. The tunnels line up with the rising and falling sun of the summer and winter solstices.

Image credits:
From the online image archive of the Land Arts of the American West, "http://landarts.org"


In the collection of Dia Art Foundation.

*The Lightning Field* is located in the desert of Western New Mexico. It consists of 400 polished stainless steel poles, approx 6 m. high. The poles attract occasional lighting strikes.

Image credits:
"http://www.diaart.org/sites/main/lightningfield"
Veronika Geiger, studio experiments, 2015

Ongoing experimentation with placing rocks on light sensitive unprocessed black and white photo paper.

Image credits:
Veronika Geiger ©
Veronika Geiger, studio experiments, 2015

Ongoing experimentation with placing rocks on light sensitive unprocessed black and white photo paper.

Image credits:
Veronika Geiger ©

In the collection of the J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles.

Cyanotype, photogram, 34.9 x 24.7 cm.


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Anna Atkins, *Ceylon/Fern British*, 1854.

In the collection of the J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles.

Cyanotype, photogram, 44.9 x 24.7 cm.

# 11


In the collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Gelatin Silver Print, photogram, 23.9 x 17.8 cm.

Image credits:
"http://www.metmuseum.org/collection/the-collection-on-line/search/265487"

# 12


In the collection of MoMA New York.

Gelatin Silver Print, photogram, 27.2 x 20.3 cm.

Image credits:

40 light sensitive photographic papers exposed to ambient light. The papers changed colour during the installation period of one month.

Installed at Den Frie Centre of Contemporary Art, Copenhagen, 2014.

Image credits:
Veronika Geiger ©


Cyanotype photogram, 76x56 cm.

Image credits:
"http://www.marymarygallery.co.uk/index.php/gallery/category/C3/lorna_macintyre/P58/"
Veronika Geiger, *Imprint (Lake Thinkvallavatn, Iceland, 2014)*

Caroussel slide projection, 15 slides, 170x90 cm.

Image credits:
Veronika Geiger ©

Gelatin silver print exposed with moonlight, toned.

Image credits:


Gelatin silver print exposed with moonlight, toned.

Image credits:
Work in progress on *Eldfell* Volcano, 14.11.2015

Image credits:
Claire Paugam ©

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Veronika Geiger, experiment on *Eldfell* volcano 14.11.2015.

Light sensitive photo paper placed under warm earth.

Resin coated black and white paper, 20 x 30 cm.

Image credits:
Veronika Geiger ©
Images showing temperatures on top of Eldfell volcano in 1990 and 2012.

Image credits: "http://www.ni.is/frettir/2012/07/05"

Jochen Lempert, *Glowworm*, 2010

Gelatine Silver Prints.


Gelatine silver print, photogram #1, imprints made in lava cave, processed in darkroom, 40 x 30 cm, unique.

Image credits:
Veronika Geiger ©

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Gelatine silver print, photogram #2, imprints made in lava cave, processed in darkroom, 40 x 30 cm, unique.

Image credits:
Veronika Geiger ©
Documentations from lava cave, Snæfellsnes, Iceland, showing how minerals are affecting the colours of the rocks in the cave.

Image credits:
Veronika Geiger ©

Documentations from lava cave, Snæfellsnes, Iceland, showing solidified lava tubes on the floor of the cave.

Image credits:
Veronika Geiger ©
Installation view from the MA graduation exhibition at Gerdasafn Museum 16. April - 16. Mai

Gelatine silver print, 50 x 60 cm
Rock type: Basalt lava
Places: Selvogsheidi, Urdarháls, Kol-lóttadyngja, Skalafell, Lambahraun, Ketildyngja
Petrographic slides borrowed from the Science Institute, University of Iceland

Image credits:
Veronika Geiger ©
Installation view from the MA graduation exhibition at Gerdasafn Museum 16. April - 16. Mai

Image credits: Veronika Geiger ©

Gelatine silver print, 100 x 150 cm
No. 8645, 8683, 8685
Rock type: Basalt lava
Place: Reykjanes Peninsula
Age: Between 2,400 and 11,000 years old
Petrographic slides borrowed from the Icelandic Institute of Natural History

Image credits: Veronika Geiger ©
Installation view from the MA graduation exhibition at Gerdasafn Museum 16. April - 16. Mai

Gelatin silver print, 100 x 150 cm
No. 6281 and 6285
Rock type: Gabbro xenoliths from silicic tuff
Place: Kambsfjall, Króksfjördur, Vestfirdir, Iceland
Age: 10 million years old
Petrographic slides borrowed from the Icelandic Institute of Natural History

Image credits:
Veronika Geiger ©

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Installation view from the MA graduation exhibition at Gerdasafn Museum 16. April - 16. Mai

Gelatine silver print, 100 x 150 cm
No. 8645, 8683, 8685
Rock type: Basalt lava
Place: Reykjanes Peninsula
Age: Between 2,400 and 11,000 years old
Petrographic slides borrowed from the Icelandic Institute of Natural History

Image credits:
Veronika Geiger ©
HD video, 04:55 min.

Image credits:
Veronika Geiger ©

Veronika Geiger
64°52′19.605″N
24°35′25.256″W
Gelatin silver print, 100 x 90 cm
Photogram made in lava cave

Image credits:
Veronika Geiger ©
Installation view from the MA graduation exhibition at Gerdasafn Museum 16. April - 16. Mai

Veronika Geiger
64°52’19.605”N
24°35.256”W
Gelatin silver print, 100 x 90 cm
Photogram made in lava cave

Image credits:
Veronika Geiger ©

Close-up of photogram

Image credits:
Veronika Geiger ©
Evariste Richer, *Micachrome* 8, 2012
Cibachrome, 162 x 120 cm
Image credits: "http://www.meessendeclercq.be/artists/evariste-richer/works/P12/"

physautotype, 20 x 16,8 cm