

Young Photography Now – Sweden

Jere Aalto

Anne Broe Kristensen

Cian Burke

David Magnusson

in conversation with Annika von Hauswolff

# Jere Aalto

**Jere Aalto:** I have strived for the deconstruction of my photographic background in various ways - even been driven by some fictive positions, being someone else, replying to someone else's refrain - for the last few years. Still, we could say that my photographic background carries an emphasis on a 'sociological fiction' that strives to locate some form of distinction from within the role of the documentarist. This demand for a difference has largely been a projection of a single fictional character, who is part of a remote trope or a narrative. And in a way this character becomes its own error.

**Annika von Hausswolff:** I like this term 'Sociological Fiction', and I am somehow interpreting it to be quite contemporary. Lately I have also come across terms such as 'Experimental Documentary' that the PhD candidate Kerstin Hamilton is currently exploring at Akademien Valand. Is your method of problematizing the position of the photographer a personal or more general way of updating the genre of photography?

**JA:** I see a lot of potential in these re-established terms, as they seem to derive from many simultaneous sources. What is the origin? Yet, the position for writing or making 'Sociological Fiction' can already be found in Jean Baudrillard's thinking, but also in the constant deconstruction of one's own creative position. This constant re-evaluation of one's previous works, sense of belonging, and production might be the starting point for the 'experimental' in this case. I've always tried to create something through which I can no longer identify myself in the past. Yes, I form a complex out of being a photographer.

**AvH:** So how is this identity play related to your imagery?

**JA:** It has a direct, yet playful relation to the pictorial motifs I have recently become fixated with: depictions of stages, arenas, entrances etc. Locations that were either built or created out of cut-outs from the original photographic event. I depict that someone is happily lost, and try to make it visible in a photographic way.

**AvH:** Baudrillard stated that signs and symbols function as the 'real' in today's society and we could draw a link to your photography here as your images are self-referential, almost existing in another universe with little or no connection to the outside. Is this something you would agree with or am I rambling?

**JA:** I agree, there is always some volume of inaccessibility in my works, either in the form of an impossibility for translation of the signs, or that my works are meant to be layers cut out of my own evolving microcosm of inaccessible semiotics. It is still intriguing today to consider that there is no origin for the image, nothing behind it.

**AvH:** And while being happily lost, do you feel that photography as a medium is the ultimate way of expressing these ideas of non-hierarchical, de-centralized space? Have you ever tried any other means of expression?

**JA:** Being happily lost, embracing it, failing and getting somewhere you were not expecting to. Photography is probably not the ultimate way, yet as a medium it is the most silent one - it offers the capacity for the viewer to get happily lost too. I have tried creating electro-acoustic sound walls and other sonic art. I enjoy the blind aspect of expression in sound works, of creating a de-centralized space. Sound artists often refer to this kind of creation of a space out of nothing.

**AvH:** Your desire to be independent from direct references to the real is an unusual position when working with the photographic medium. Perhaps the true burden of photography is its expected connection to physical reality. By transgressing that authoritarian demand there is a new freedom at hand. I happen to know your fascination or interest in the Dada movement, could you describe what importance Dadaism has for your work?

**JA:** I see this speculated position more as a difference, in my case it's not on banal grounds. The collective demand for the deconstruction of the 'real' effect of photography will always remain dominant. We have to choose between the role of a trickster or of an iconoclast. Yes, I have romanticised the 'pure freedom' of language that Dadaism was proliferating, and failing with. The Dadaists always ended up answering the question: Was it just for laughs or...? [...] My own, late, interest in Dada is in the fact that their typographical experimentations and sound art developed my interest in the arbitrary process of translating the visual into

a new language or to combinations of signs that don't culminate in instant answers.

**AvH:** You mention the trickster, a mythological figure that I have paid some attention to in the past. The tale of the trickster stems from Native American mythology, but there are analogies to contemporary artistic practice. By avoiding law and order there is a temporary notion of freedom created for the artist, but also the viewer. Then again, our society has largely become a consumer's paradise. Are you sometimes concerned that the audience is not investing enough when approaching your art?

**JA:** Regarding what the trickster creates out of one's autonomous projections, this creation is always linked to a certain positivism, whether it stems from humour or deconstruction. That's why I mentioned earlier the distinction between a trickster and an iconoclast. Here, the iconoclast is on another 'end'. I don't have that much experience of this audience, or their reflections. By making exhibitions I offer the playfulness, be it in a rigorous or a loose sense.

**AvH:** On what level does this playfulness operate? Is it in the collective space that you as an artist share with the works and the audience or is it embedded in the motives themselves?

**JA:** This might sound a bit bland but the playfulness we are framing here is loaded with serendipity at both ends of production. Out there in the field where it is playfulness through ignorance in a Baudrillardian way, and in the exhibition where the serendipity is an invitation to transcribe meanings out of the layers that I have cut from the original image. Does this make sense? I would like to say: hopefully not. It is also very interesting to say that I am not interested in the photographic act. It 'throws me'.

**AvH:** I have never come across anti-artistic (Baudrillard quote) as an expression before and I actually read it as antichrist. Focusing on my error, this rhetoric figure - the false prophet - is a very powerful one even outside of a religious context. The fallen angel as a trickster, as an artist. My associations then drift toward portraits depicting René Magritte painting his conceptual images all dressed up as a fashionista. Some kind of trickster. I think Magritte was all about questioning the process of cause and effect? Do you think Magritte is a relevant reference to your work?

**JA:** Magritte was mainly keen on the limits of the photographic and vision. In many portraits of him we see him making reproductions from actual photographs. Thus, what we see is an abyss within the imaginary itself. For me this has always meant that the artist could not achieve causality (which you pointed out) on the direct symbolic level of the work. As in my work too, Magritte aimed to import elements from our vernacular every day in their alterity - in order to depict the vision that a photographic image is shading. The only difference is that I don't manage to master this approach. And there is not much of the symbolic causality in my work. There is once again - playfulness - yet a very mute, silent one.

**AvH:** I agree that the lack of causality is evident more in your images' relation to 'reality' than within the image itself. Magritte is quoted to have said, 'I've got nothing to express! I simply search for images and I invent, I invent...only the image counts, the inexplicable and mysterious image (...)' To me this is very encouraging, the thought of the image as the only thing that counts. And the rest, everything else, is merely material to feed the image. I would like to address your exam exhibition, *Stages after Seri*. A series of images and thoughts that was completed after a lengthy stay of yours in Japan. Did you lose yourself in this, relating to Scandinavia, remote place?

**JA:** The mental source of the images, I consider what that consists of. Quite often the source is an urge to get lost in the far away. With *Stages after Seri* I had made some observations before I descended onto Japanese vernacular. For this was a retreat in order to give way to vernacular tropes that were explicit i.e. *Japanese Times* articles setting crypto-states of one's body rhythms against sleeping, working life and the notion of everydayness in the Japanese economic ethos. To seek these tropes with a photographic sensitivity, as representations of the other, felt inaccessible. A certain romanticism was embedded in my search for one singular trope that would signal the mechanical

In conversation with Annika von Hausswolff

characteristics of the impersonal and vernacular standpoint. In this sense, I did not lose myself to Japan but to its catalogue image, its visual repertoire. The sense of remoteness operated like an abyss to a pure vision and thus also as an entrance to a new page in my artistry. And yes, I like the attitude of expressing nothing directly, just finding the best combination matters.

**AvH:** One of the images in *Stages after Seri* (which by the way is a very cinematic title) depicts a space where only two physical elements are present; a net of some sort that is dominating the image space and a rectangular spotlight in the upper right corner. The third element is darkness. It is almost impossible to navigate within the frame of the image or to understand what kind of space this is. Thus, I imagine it to be the view of a deep-sea creature which is being cornered by some researcher with expensive equipment and funding from the state. My brain may be excused for wanting to create a narrative. What is your own relationship to the notion of narrative, do you try to avoid readings such as the above?

**JA:** I don't try to avoid narrative guidelines when I consider the later reading of my works. This inherent reaction to seek out the narrative lies at the centre of our perception and survival instinct. It is to recognise the teleology in stationary subjects. I used to be fascinated by this reflection upon the photograph's passive duration, a setting in which photographic imagery is associated with the cinematic *still* image. If something in that image you referred to (*assured*, 2017) is being encircled or literally captured beneath this sinister net (that the darkness is holding still), then it is the interrogated position of my own practice and errors that I enjoyed making when I depicted the Japanese Seri. There was a text piece in my exam exhibition in which I describe the craftsmen's (The Shadow Crafters) position beneath the Japanese Kabuki theatre stage. These operators were professional manipulators and tricksters who did not see the results of their manoeuvres. They only saw the reflecting light that sloped into their eyes when they opened the Seri-hatch; the vertical lift. In the work *assured* (2017), the upright corner spotlight(s) give way to this theoretical 'imelight' that I was possessed with. One can see through this mesh/net, but it is still above you.

**AvH:** Someone has said that artworks operate like stray dogs once they are made public. In a sense then, the artist's responsibility towards the artwork is dissolved or inverted onto the viewer in the end. Do you have a favourite artwork or an image you keep returning to?

**JA:** Stray dogs. In 2008, at Kuta Lombok in Indonesia, me and a friend got surrounded by a pack of stray dogs in the middle of nowhere on a pitch-black night. That sound! I wonder how it would feel if your works would do the same. Suddenly overruling you. What would that sound like? Your works giving direct feedback in onomatopoeias. These are the kind of images I return to. And sometimes to Thomas Feuerstein's work in general. They create hybrid life forms. Biological tricksters.

<sup>1</sup>"to render the artistic enterprise as a form of illusion: not in the sense of trickery, but in the sense of 'bringing something into play, of creating a scene, a space, a game, and a rule of play. Ultimately, it is about inventing ways of making things appear and about surrounding them with a void, thus annihilating the whole process of cause and effect, because this process is decidedly anti-artistic. Illusion tries to uncover the linkages between forms, at the place where they come into connection on their own" cited in Baudrillard, Jean. *Revenge of the Crystal: Selected Writings on the Modern Object and its Destiny, 1968-1983*, (London: Pluto Press, 1999), p.27

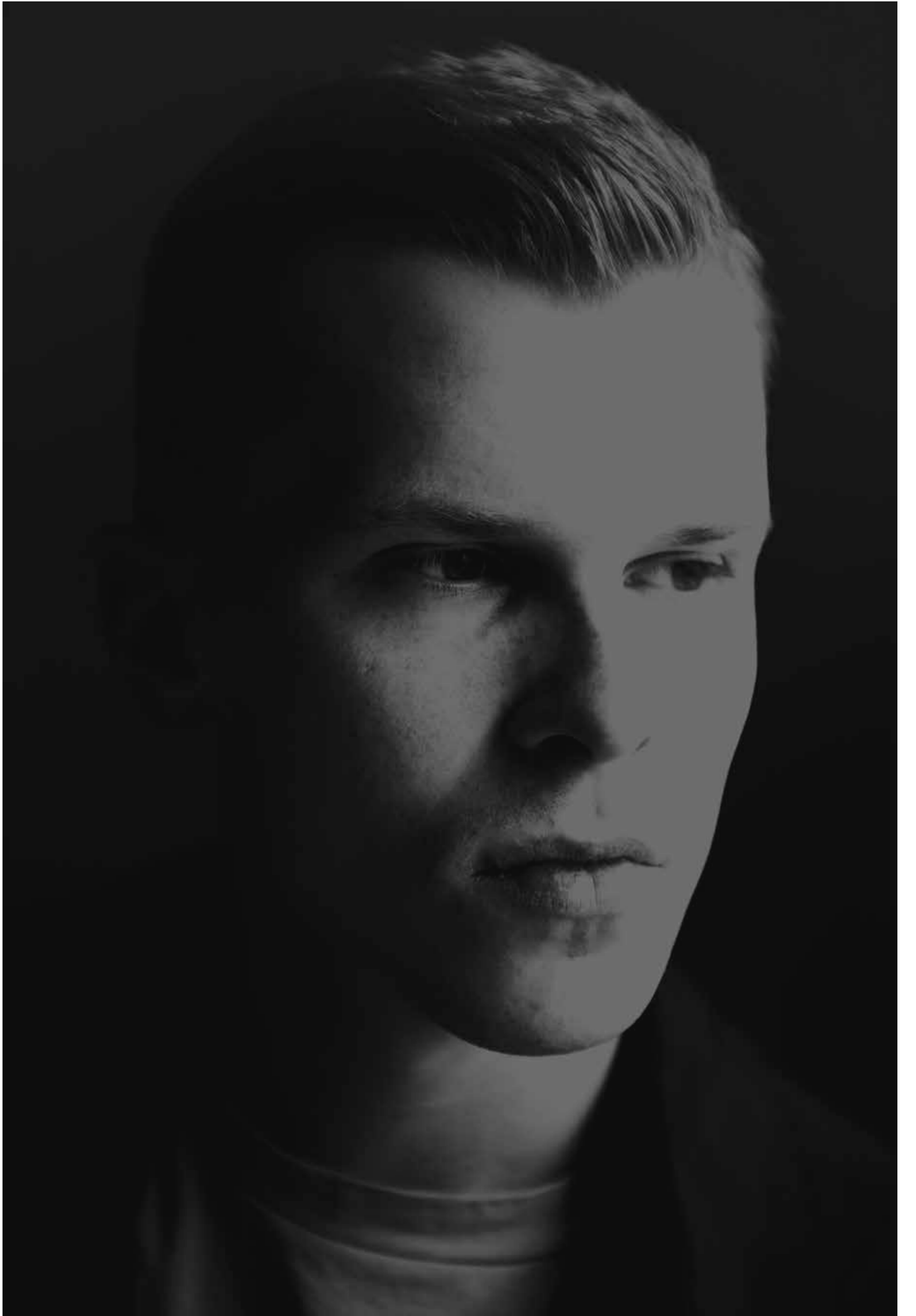


Photo: Annika von Hausswolff

# Anne Broe Kristensen

**Anne Broe Kristensen:** I started photographing 'for real' when I was 21. Photography was just something that suddenly emerged as the best possible way of dealing with having emotions and the experience of existing in the world and commenting on it, in such a way that I could touch other people. It was a way to connect. I don't really perceive myself as a photographer in that sense. I am an analogue photographer solely, from negative to final print, and that crucial part of the process, being in the colour darkroom, is essential to why I use photography as my medium and why I make work at all. I experience photography as an additive process - each new image expanding on the already existing entity of the work. My main focus is the difference and ambivalence between the body as a physical shell as opposed to a container of our emotions and inner life. Essentially the works are projections of an internal landscape, and I am interested in this interface between our external and internal spaces.

**Annika von Hausswloff:** It makes me curious to learn that you do not consider yourself to be a photographer. I can relate to the resistance towards defining who or what you are in terms of being a creative being, but are there any other reasons for you not to perceive yourself as a photographer?

**ABK:** Maybe I mean that I don't consider myself a photographer in the more traditional sense. The notion of the photographer in the very male sense of walking around with a camera all the time and knowing all the technical skills involved in making a 'good' negative. I am still surprised when I manage to expose 'correctly'. Photography is everywhere everyday - we make mental photographs all the time. To me photography is very much connected to our souls and I still find it wonderfully mysterious and magical when my negatives and prints turn out the way I want. Although I know I am in control of the outcome, it always feels like a small miracle out of my control.

**AvH:** I share your fascination with photography but find it hard sometimes to maintain the passion in a world that is flooded with photographic images. And it is precisely for this reason that the work being done by you and your fellow artists today is of such value to the community. An engaged and multi-layered style of photography that calls on the spectator to reflect and enjoy this phenomenon. I know your process to be, as you state above, of organic nature; where you do not work on projects (as many other photographers do) but more in cycles, and you sometimes speak of individual images as being active or asleep.

**ABK:** I prefer to think of the way I work as organic, and of the new material as expanding and building on top of the already existing body of work. Like in music or dance I also work in sequences - I am very connected to that cyclical way of working. I am trying to make small comments not grand stories - fragments and repeated passages of a longer notion of a melody. A sequence is essentially a repeated passage, and I repeat myself a lot. But rather than seeing it as a repetition, I perceive it as an emphasis! When creating a new sequence, I mix and match from both old and new material. Some images have been reused for years, but in different constellations and therefore with different messages and subject matters. The images cannot stand alone, they need each other to become something and 'dance'. Some images are highly active and have been incorporated in sequences for years, others are passive as in that they are dead, which means I have developed away from them. Yet others are passive in the sense that they are 'sleeping' and might suddenly awaken when a new image is created, as the new image calls out for them or vice versa. So, it is this constantly flipping dialogue between old and new material, active and passive images. I am very connected to my work, especially my prints, and I treat them with a lot of love and respect (also the shitty ones) and I am often superstitious about them.

**AvH:** I understand that you are occupied with the materiality of your practice and very specific photographic places such as the darkroom. What happens to your relationship to your work when it is being exhibited? Is there another joy in that situation, when strangers' eyes connect with your images?

**ABK:** Just to elaborate a bit on the relationship with the colour darkroom, a major part of my practice is printing the images in that 'space' and that part of the process is crucial to me. In that

room, another mental space is created - another 'time-zone' - where one can let the thoughts about the work grow, develop, and expand while printing. It all comes down to *working* the image in a very physical way, which creates a strong bond and relationship with the work. It is also the place where I re-position myself in terms of looking objectively at the work and de-personalising the subject-matter. That space in the colour darkroom is essential to my creative process and the way I work, develop, and build on my ideas. To me the colour darkroom is not post-production, it is *the* production and the most exciting part of the process. The pure passion of fighting the print, sitting on a bucket exposing while talking to the paper being exposed, breaking your back, sore feet from doing the night-shift over 12 hours, dancing when a test-strip comes out right and during the winter staying warm by curling up close to the machine, praying that the fixer won't go bad before you've managed to land a filtration. The analogue aspect and the colour darkroom is more about a certain mindfulness and bodily manner of engaging than maybe it is about *the quality of the print*. All that other stuff about being a major geek about paper and filtration is just a great side benefit that comes with that game.

But to answer your question: yes, the relationship with the work changes once it is out of the colour darkroom and mounted, ready to be installed. That is where the synergy breaks. The symbiosis in the darkroom is, I must say, mostly connected to the actual print and giving birth to that. It is not so much a symbiosis with the subject matter but also, as mentioned, the place where I often de-personalise the subject-matter. So, when the work is exhibited and out of 'the dark' it becomes something else, it becomes independent. You cannot expect people to feel and think certain things - I do not have the right to do that. I just always hope they feel at least something. My hope is that I, for a tiny moment, created a room and space for the spectator to feel something (whatever that might be) and connect on a level that evokes personal recollections and experiences.

**AvH:** Earlier in our conversation you stated that you wanted to avoid creating 'grand stories', could you tell a bit more about the visual components that form your work? It seems like, for the time being, you have narrowed down your subjects of interest to visual representations of the body and organic nature.

**ABK:** I do not mean 'grand stories' in a cynical way, what I mean is that the topics I'm interested in are not grand in the sense that it is large-scale issues such as climate change or war. They are very banal things that I am addressing, but I do not consider the meaning of banal in an insignificant way - it is just the fact that my focus of interest *is* banal, common and everyday emotions. I am interested in the tension and interface of our internal and external landscapes, and that is where I am trying to harbour my images at the moment. I am allured by the body and our skin; the surface, the cover, the beautiful, and the deceitful. The togetherness, a sense of intimacy yet distance, the pain of being together, with yourself - with others - is always ambivalent. Photography is a way for me to try and seek an understanding and appreciation of my gender, body and sexuality. Through my work, I try to comprehend how we as humans, especially females, perceive ourselves and our bodies. A great pleasure and deep fascination with just looking and observing is the starting point. I am concerned with the naked body, the shell we all manoeuvre in every day, the body as a home - yet a heavy burden. The human shell can be very secretive, and in this context, the skin, and the vulnerability it contains becomes fascinating. The 'gap' between our outer shell - our bodies, and our soul and emotions - our innerness, is to me very interesting. The secretiveness, silence and sadness fascinates me - the silent trauma. Also, beauty is an important ingredient. But I am starting to change perspective in how I think about my work, and I realise that the two lines of inquiry, body-nature, have been too divided and might start to merge a lot more.

**AvH:** I cannot help myself asking in what way your perspective is about to change. You mention a merging of the entities body and nature, is this a formal merge or a conceptual one?

**ABK:** Recently external forces have made me look very critically upon the glasses through which I have been viewing

the world, and that has highly affected the way I think about my practice and work. When your reality changes, your practice changes. It is not a drastic change in perspective - it never is - I am quite a snail, not a racehorse, and changes within the work often seem miniscule to some people, but to me they are massive. But I guess a lot of artists feel like that! I just feel so incredibly fortunate to have been able to work and indulge in my passion. It is such a privileged position to be in, I mean the world is crashing and burning, and here I am telling stories of lame middle-class problems with flowers and stuff. I am not diminishing my work, I am just saying that I feel very grateful to be working with photography. The merge within the work will probably be both formal and conceptual, I need to generate more new material before I know where I am heading next.

**AvH:** Rather than seeing flowers in your work I see representations of the subconscious. The way you depict organic matter, intuitively and random, mimics the supposedly irrational forests and swamps of our souls. The images of plants ooze a peculiar aggressiveness that I think communicates very well with the images of the body.

I remember a tutorial we had where I showed you a photobook that I had discovered recently, although it was initially produced in the 70s. Now I can't remember the female photographers name but I thought the images in that book bore resemblances to your visual world. What influences do you have within the field of photography, if any?

**ABK:** I am very glad that you perceive the 'snapshot' images of nature and organic matter in this way, as that is how they are intended. But I also know that when you combine the female body with plants and flowers it instantly raises a certain train of thought and connotation in some people. But to me these images of plants, which are created intuitively from the gut and on random night walks, represent corners and alleys of the subconscious. Perhaps this is a simplistic and boxed-in way of thinking about the subconscious, but I make these images in an almost raw and compulsive way using cheap disposable cameras. Essentially, I started using disposable cameras because I wanted to let go of all the components involved in creating a good negative. I was sick of the rigidity of my Mamiya RB67 and I just wanted to 'run wild' for a bit, lose control and play. It is these two ambivalent and opposing sides of my practice - control versus complete lack of control.

The female photographer who you introduced me to in that tutorial was Agneta Ekman and the work of hers was 'Tall Maja'. I have looked into her work since then and she is extremely admirable, I mean she is this incredible analogue photographer and her images are like pure music. I perceive her as a poet or some kind of singer-songwriter and when looking at her work I often tend to cry, it is just so honest and beautiful.

My early influences within photography, and the people that I keep coming back to as reference points and who just keep doing it for me, are female Finnish photographers such as: Elina Brotherus, Aino Kannisto, Anni Leppälä, Susanna Majuri and Marjana Kella. Those are indeed my heroes. But also, Nan Goldin, Wolfgang Tillmans and Corinne Day have been important reference points. Female Danish photographers such as Fie Tanderup and Maja Ingerslev are extremely interesting for several reasons, but especially since they are working from an analogue mind-set within their practises. To me what I find inspiring and liberating is when something is honest and 'pure'. Of course, those are relative terms, but maybe you know what I mean?



## The Photographer as Editor

Jere Aalto, Anne Broe Kristensen, Cian Burke, and David Magnusson attended the international MFA Programme in photography at Valand Academy between 2015 and 2017. The programme’s aim is to foster critical awareness and ‘knowledge-in-action’, where a dialogical approach is central. One of the goals within this, is to deepen the understanding of photography and explore the creative possibilities of the medium – in order to broaden this framework, scrutiny is directed towards both contemporary and historical practitioners. The driving force is the movement between creation and reflection, but also a curiosity towards other fields of art practice and their respective image realms. What is fascinating within photography in particular, is the links to an incomprehensible number of social phenomena and burning issues.

The programme also places a robust emphasis on the students’ individual development, which becomes immediately discernible through the distinct visual expressions of the works made by the four young photographers. This is played out through choice of scale and the manner in which works are presented, preference for colour or black and white, references to other works, and the combination of text and image. As the viewer acquaints themselves with these varied approaches and processes that shape the works’ form and content – two essentially interconnected aspects – the individual properties of the projects become even clearer.

On a conceptual level, Jere Aalto has found inspiration in a particular stage mechanism used in Japanese kabuki theatre known as *seri*. First developed during the 18th century and routinely used during the Edo era, *seri* made it possible to transform a scene by utilising doors located on the stage floor. Based on this dynamic device, he has created images characterised by an ambiguous spatiality; both the structure of the images and their interrelationships undermine the idea of a coherent story, which traditionally plays such a prominent role in photography. Aalto’s frequently opaque images revel in a certain incomprehensibility, whilst at the same time they remain simultaneously beautiful and disquieting. This aspect of the work is supplemented by a strong connection to the playful and subversive attitude of surrealism and dadaism.

Anne Broe Kristensen combines studies of naked bodies with close-ups of plants. The former are pin-sharp and convey the bright tones of the skin, while the latter are dark, colour-saturated and dramatically blurred, creating a contrast-rich dynamic. The compositions vary depending on the context and they have an intuitive and rhythmic character. Image has been added to image and together they form a whole in which the different parts visibly affect each other. Her work revolves around the body as both a shell in which the skin meets the world and as a container that holds our feelings and inner lives. The work is also a visual exploration of experiences related to the body as gender and carrier of identity. For Anne Broe Kristensen, the analogue photographic process is an important aspect of the work. She describes how its slowness generates opportunities for reflection and that the darkroom is not merely a place where the images are printed; it also creates a mental state closely linked to the material and physical aspects of image production.

On his walks, which often take place on the periphery of urban spaces, Cian Burke photographs overlooked objects and locations that when isolated and removed from their context, become estranged from their origins. The sense of mystery is heightened by the fact that the images are arranged into systems whereby it is not immediately obvious what constitutes the principle of the selection or the arrangement. However, there are details and structures in the images that repeat and these similarities create a pattern of connections. In a sense, Cian Burke builds archives, thereby connecting to the resolve of science to understand and explain the world and ourselves; but here, it is performed as an interpretation that shifts between the objective and the poetic. The work also contains a map that depicts an aspect of the Solar System, with the encounter between it and the photographs revealing an arc that spans from the time-bound nature of everyday life into the infinity of space.

David Magnusson’s work deals with one of most urgent and pressing subjects of our current time; migration and the refugee crisis. Those who are forced to flee from war, persecution and poverty are seeking a route to Europe, often with their

lives at stake. And for those who arrive, an ongoing and destructive struggle to establish themselves awaits. In order to portray this, David Magnusson has chosen a markedly different approach than both news media outlets and traditional documentary photography. The crucial difference is in how his work contains a dual perspective, focusing on the critical situation and a specific individual’s experience of escaping, as well as the ethical dilemmas one is faced with when choosing to portray other people’s suffering. How does one avoid reinforcing the role of ‘the other’ and thereby restricting the identity of the portrayed individual? Is it even possible to avoid at all? With a huge enlarged screenshot from the online game World of Warcraft at its centre, the work reflects on a young person’s life today, while at the same time investigating the problems of depiction itself.

Despite their different approaches, certain shared characteristics can be identified within the works of these four photographers. The most obvious being what could be referred to as an editorial or curatorial relationship to the presentation of their images. They are presented in groups or spread out one by one. At first glance the arrangements may seem arbitrary, but reveal themselves to maintain connections of both a visual and narrative character. The walls and the space often become an integral part of the whole, creating a specific interaction with the site in which the works are arranged. The possibility to freely vary the formats as well as the method in which the images are displayed – framed or unframed, glued directly to the wall or attached in other ways – is closely linked to the essence of photography as a medium.

With all four, there is also a conscious approach to, and exploiting of, photography’s specific characteristics – not least the issues of representation that are strongly associated with the photographic image. What is important, however, is that this occurs without the unique nature and character of the photograph being unambiguously defined or defended, but instead as an open experiment into the kind of meaning and impact photography can have. Through conversations with Annika von Hausswolff – a key element within this book – Jere Aalto, Anne Broe Kristensen, Cian Burke and David Magnusson share their thoughts on their own work. The discussions develop certain interests and concerns that to a large extent define contemporary Swedish photography today.

*Niclas Östlind*, PhD in photography and Head of the MFA Programme in Photography at Valand Academy

# Cian Burke

**Cian Burke:** I've often thought of my use of photography as a means to make sense of the world around me, as I perceive it. For the longest time that has often related to inquiries into urban space, various interpretations of the constructed environment that allowed me to better understand my surroundings. I've always been fascinated by city space; the layering of history in its makeup that is often barely perceptible or the traces or detritus that one might come upon that can hint at some hidden meaning. I enjoy the camera's ability to isolate and remove things from their context, to provide an alternative mode of seeing objects or locations and allows disconnected fragments to enact a dialogue with each other.

**Annika von Hausswolff:** It seems like photography, with its indexical relation to what is depicted and simultaneous ability to revoke time and space, is quite an appropriate machine for you to operate. In your imagery, I see an almost childlike fascination with objects and locations parallel to a scientific type of curiosity and urge to categorise or label seemingly unimportant signs and artefacts from *out there*. Is there any critique of sorts embedded in your overall project?

**CB:** I suppose my tendency to treat objects with a sort of unprejudiced equivalence is in a way an attempt to connect with the mode of a child's inquiry, a mode which is always imaginative as they're inventing their own world. Art practice (like scientific practice I imagine) can utilize this same type of visual strategy and become a means to follow a line of curiosity to its logical, or indeed at times illogical, conclusion.

I've been considering the various scientific processes of collecting and collating a wide range of phenomena as a means for creating a system for organising knowledge and for providing an overview for a better understanding. And I suppose in a way I try to incorporate this approach to the images I make of disparate objects that I come across. The sequences of images I create perhaps don't answer any questions but hopefully do allow for an unforeseen structure to begin to reveal itself.

So, I'm not sure if there is a critique as such in my work but I think I am certainly attempting to draw allusions to the complex nature and history of photography as a means to define 'reality' through perception and to provide definitive answers to many unsolvable questions.

**AvH:** The critique I could detect in your practice is possibly the formal mimicking of rationality in some of your works. Like traces of evidence without hinting to what specific inquiry is going on. In some sense a parodic gesture but at the same time a serious attempt to create a better understanding of a world which, when cross-examined, actually lacks valid answers. Your MFA solo exhibition at Akademien Valand earlier this year was titled *Rectangular Universe* which sounds like an oxymoron but has a tale to it?

**CB:** The title came to me from a book by Arthur Koestler in which he traces the history of Western cosmology and mankind's search to understand the universe. At an early stage of this search the theory that the entire universe took the form of a rectangle was put forward. This struck me as extremely intriguing in how it related to the way our perception of what is real evolves as we continuously make new discoveries; gradually what is unknown becomes known. And of course, the idea of a rectangular universe can also be an allusion to photography, itself a system of perception and a means for potentially expanding or questioning our conception of 'reality'.

**AvH:** This realization, that the universe is hardly rectangular (and the earth does not resemble a pancake), makes you wonder which 'truths' that we live by today will be unveiled in the future as a total scam. Do you in any way keep track of scientific findings or is it merely the concept or image of science that interests you?

**CB:** I don't really tend to delve too deeply into the specifics of scientific findings as so much of it just goes over my head and I can't really make sense of it in any meaningful way. But I'm always captivated by the role of certain visual apparatus in aiding the presentation of scientific research. A long text constructed of data isn't easy to decipher or read closely if one doesn't have the specialist knowledge but an image from the Hubble telescope or other visualisations of things beyond our grasp or experi-

ence can provide us a visceral means to wrestle with complex, abstract concepts that could otherwise feel a tad overwhelming.

**AvH:** A piece of yours included in the exhibition *Rectangular Universe* consists of a book of star charts laying open with a geometric sphere placed upon it. This composition sits upon a custom-built plinth. It is a funny, poetic, yet brutal piece relying heavily on what you could describe as the visual rhetoric of science. Why did you decide to bring objects into your photographic realm?

**CB:** Actually, I think it's probably been a long time coming as sculptural forms have been quite evident in much of my images for a while now, but it's only been with this more recent body of work that I've found a way to incorporate objects into my work without feeling that they dominated the images too much.

I liked how the inclusion of certain objects or sculptures seemed to challenge the nature of the objects depicted in the images and emphasise the tension between the image and the object. We tend to overlook the materiality of the photograph and concentrate on the image itself. The act of photographing an object establishes a distance, it flattens and freezes everything in space and time and references an experience that has already *been*. The objects function in a different way, they have an immediate presence and are experienced in a more physical, bodily manner.

I was also making reference to scientific archives and though the various objects functioned in different ways I felt they also created a sort of unity that reflected and highlighted the systematic nature of a scientific or museum display.

The piece to which you're referring was a reworking of a map, a kind of awkward attempt to reimagine it as a non-flat form. It became quite abstract and in my mind began to function a bit like a photograph, an abstraction of the world *out there* and how we see it and interpret it.

**AvH:** As beautiful and suggestive as that world is, it makes a lot of sense to view it abstractly to get the necessary distance in order to obtain a conceivable notion of our so-called reality. The playwright and theatre director Bertolt Brecht coined the term *Verfremdungseffekt*, and although the essence of the term has been debated it has significance to the photographic way of distancing the object or scene depicted from the reality as we perceive it. As I interpret this phenomenon it is only when abstracting your knowledge of something, be it in a poetic literal way or in a visual manner, that you get close to some kind of true understanding. In my mind, you work in between the documentary field and the mannerisms of staged photography, where the notion of truth is up for negotiation. What kind of strategy do you use to get close to your subject matter? I know for a fact that you are no stranger to the activity of the flaneur.

**CB:** I think Brecht's term is even more vital in considering photography now that the world is thoroughly saturated and mediated through photographic images. The tactic of breaking the link between reality and its representation and the notion of indexicality is a concern that runs through so much of contemporary photography now with the ubiquitous nature of digital technologies.

Getting back to your question, a big part of my process involves just setting off into some area or place that I've never been before and exploring almost at random. I find that this mode of drifting purposefully allows me to see more attentively and can invite some form of underlying pattern to emerge. I've also been particularly influenced by ideas around psychogeography, and certain writers of that genre who have engaged in similar practices of urban meandering as a means to provide certain insights and new or alternative ways of apprehending our surroundings. On my walks, I tend to be drawn to quite peripheral, borderline and often unremarkable spaces and I just allow myself to respond to what the location provides me. In doing this I tend to build up quite a large amount of raw material and then I attempt to figure out if there is a logic at work within the images.

**AvH:** This method, of purposeful drifting (which could be compared to what Sigmund Freud described as evenly-suspended attention - an attitude the psychoanalyst should have towards his/her analysand in the situation of an analysis in order to even-

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tually recognize patterns in the stories), seems to be a somewhat radical way of working these days. Both in terms of going about not knowing exactly what you will find out there but also spending 'valuable' time on this unpredictable outcome. This could of course be said to be the core of artistic practice but it seems perhaps that the execution of ideas is the predominant method of creativity in today's society. Are there any thoughts of resistance embedded in your practice?

**CB:** I like that idea of psychoanalysing the urban landscape, slowly unearthing its dark secrets! But I kind of view it more as a playful approach to archaeology, in that way I'm not sure what I'll come across but on some level I do have an idea of what I'm looking for. I can't really say that I take no preconceived ideas with me, but it is a fairly free and unfettered thought process that I take along and of course this can be a bit unnerving as the outcome is so uncertain. But I like to give myself that freedom and I've learnt to trust the images, that through them the work will find its direction.

I also allow for the emergence of elements of chance and haphazard meetings, I'm drawn to the idea of fortuitous connections and of trying to combine different components that can perhaps seem a little disparate, but together as a whole can suggest something beyond what they express individually. I don't think it's that unusual to work in this way, especially with photography, taking a quite unconstrained approach and allowing the world to reveal things to us that we often couldn't have predicted. We seem to live in a culture that is obsessed by certainty and definitive answers and I think this goes against the human spirit, uncertainty is perhaps what drives us forward. Maybe my thirst for the unfamiliar and my use of serendipity and chance opportunism to fuel discovery is my resistance in this regard.

As I've just emerged from a two-year programme at an art education institution my approach has at times raised interesting discussions. In that context, a certain emphasis is often placed on rigorous research based practices which in my opinion can have a tendency to become overtly academic in their outlook. The danger in my mind is that this can create a kind of closed circuit, art for an intellectual elite that can end up losing its relevancy to the society from which it springs.

**AvH:** I want to believe that studying in a critical environment will generate knowledge and skills that all students benefit from in the long run. Having said that, the institution must always be aware of its position in society and reflect upon what kind of artistic vision it promotes!

But if we go back to the term psychogeography, presumably coined by the French author Guy Debord in the 1950s: '[...] psychogeography is, as the name suggests, the point at which psychology and geography collide [...]' This reminds me of a conversation we had last year where you told me about a place, perhaps a village, you want to visit with the intention of making a cinematic work.

**CB:** Yes, Portmeirion. It's a small seaside resort in the north of Wales built by a man named Bertram Clough Williams-Ellis, who was by all accounts, a rather eccentric architect. He started work on it in the 1920s and was still adding to it until shortly before his death in 1978. The entire village is a complete mishmash of different architectural styles, mostly constructed from various elements taken from disused, ruined buildings or entire structures which were relocated from elsewhere. The village became quite well known in the 1960s when it was used as the backdrop for a TV series called *The Prisoner*, a kind of science fiction spy show.

I'd read about it a few years ago and there is something that really interests me in this mode of collecting fragments of unwanted architecture from various places and bringing them back to life, a kind of retirement home for dying buildings. And it could be said that, in his creation, Bertram Clough Williams-Ellis was most certainly employing the sort of playful approach to the urban environment that Guy Debord and the Situationists championed.



# David Magnusson

این نیز بگذرد *This Too Shall Pass* could be described as a constructive failure of an attempt to address the desperate situation of migrants in Europe today, while also trying to untangle the problems of representation within photography. The work comes from a frustration with the inability to ever fully understand or communicate the history of another individual. It's built on that inability, however that doesn't exclude the possibility of identification or empathy but rather puts it to the test – in this case to expand the perception of what might at first appear to be a meaningless image.

**Annika von Hausswolff:** Could you elaborate on the conditions and the installation of this work?

**David Magnusson:** The project consists of three works all revolving around a screenshot taken from the online roleplaying game World of Warcraft in which Yashar Maghsoudi plays as the Blood Elf Paladin 'Nighetboy'. At the time Yashar was 13 years old and living in Bandar-e Anzali in Iran. By forming a group with other players and traveling for hours across all the virtual borders within the world of the game, Yashar had finally been able to make it into the heart of the capital city of the opposing nation. While this is one of the most difficult tasks to achieve in World of Warcraft, Yashar was unable to realise the full significance of this until two years later. Forced to escape the country after being persecuted by the religious police in Iran, Yashar was able to sell his virtual character to pay for his real escape – most likely saving his life. By participating in a virtual conflict, making it across the borders of a fictional world, it became possible for Yashar to cross the very real borders of Iran and Europe when faced by a real threat.

In combination with the image, an audio recording explores Yashar's story about how the virtual world became a way for him to escape the real oppression in Iran, both figuratively and literally. The audio continues into present day where Yashar's asylum application has been rejected six times, leaving him in a legal limbo in which he's neither granted asylum nor deported. Alongside the audio is a table containing texts, notes and Polaroid photographs which investigate the creative process and the problems of representation within photography, while also posing the question of whether it's ever possible to tell another person's story – which in this case is both political and deeply personal.

**AvH:** Since I met you a year ago, you have been very much immersed in deconstructing everything you had previously learnt about documentary photography. In a way, you have been renegotiating all your former truths, and using that process to try to construct something new?

**DM:** I think that's a very good summary of what I have been attempting to do. My work is primarily about finding ways to work with photography in a manner that explores and examines the medium, but also critiques and problematizes it. If the meaning of a photograph is in constant flux then I wonder what function a photograph can have beyond the purely aesthetic!? By taking my own practice apart and putting it back together in a way that makes clear that the result is a reflection, a representation, I hope to explore the actual connection between my work and reality.

**AvH:** Was there a certain point in time or any specific events connected to your feeling the need to start this process of deconstruction?

**DM:** It all started when I had my first contact with postmodern photography during the World Press Photo Masterclass in 2008. It showed me that it was possible to use photography to create complex questions rather than to present simplified answers or statements. I was struck by how I, as the viewer of such photography, could expand on its meaning by myself, and how it made me conscious of the way its meaning was something created in the meeting between me and the work. This realisation was something that expanded the possibilities of photography for me and completely changed my approach to the medium.

**AvH:** Before you started your MFA studies you created a project called *Purity*. It is quite a formal body of work which explores the social phenomenon of the Purity Balls in the United States. If you compare this work to the subject you have currently been dealing with and how you have chosen to address it, there is a huge difference in your creative approach and in the

function of the final work.

**DM:** *Purity* started from the simple idea of trying to create a series of portraits where the participants could be proud of the pictures in the same way as they are proud of their decisions – while the exact same photograph might hold a very different meaning to a viewer coming from a different context. Even though it's formally reminiscent of classical series of portraits, I hope that the work questions what we consider a portrait and how we interpret it. While *Purity*, of course, deals with the interesting phenomenon of the Purity Balls and its participants, the main question I wanted to address was how the meaning of a photograph constantly changes depending on who's looking at it.

In contrast, my new work *This Too Shall Pass* questions what controls the readability – or unreadability – of one single image. In this case it's a screenshot, which at first sight might appear meaningless, but if you dive into the surrounding works you can learn that the image could be considered as the most accurate summary of the history of an individual. At least the most accurate summary I was able to accomplish. While the image is filled with symbols of a profound meaning for Yashar, who's story the project attempts to tell, these symbols only work through his eyes. To decode the image, you are forced to use what you're able to learn of his history from the connected works and try to see the image from his perspective. So, while *Purity* is a portrait series created with the intention to question the stability of the meaning of a photograph, *This Too Shall Pass* could in a way be considered as the closest thing to a portrait I've ever done.

**AvH:** Can you speak a little bit about what your initial intentions were for *This Too Shall Pass*? Why were you interested in migration as a subject?

**DM:** The legal system surrounding migration had struck me as such a strange phenomenon as the systems of inclusion and exclusion are principally built on individual testimonials. The interpretation and the credibility that is afforded to these testimonies often decides a person's fate, sometimes if they live or die. In turn that creates many questions about who has the right to make such decisions regarding the lives of countless human beings. Researching this process, it was hard not to see similarities in the way these testimonies are interpreted differently at different times or in different contexts to the way I believe the meaning of a photograph is the result of endless negotiations between different elements of power. In a way, I kept coming back to the same questions: who decides history? Who decides how we read knowledge? Who decides what is true?

**AvH:** So, you saw an analogy between how testimonials in migration cases are interpreted and how the meaning of a photograph is read?

**DM:** Yes, at least a loose one. The only thing I knew was that I wanted to do a project about migration, while simultaneously trying to problematize the way history is constructed and a narrative is interpreted. In contrast to the way I worked with *Purity*, I didn't have any specific concept in mind when I was starting out. I wanted to leave room for the concept to be shaped by the subject during the work process, rather than the other way around, and it turned out to be one of the most difficult things I've ever done. No matter what approach I tried I kept running into different contradictions which made me reject idea after idea, particularly as I felt it was extremely difficult not to fall into clichés or generalisations.

**AvH:** Parallel to your creation of a portrait of this young refugee, Yashar, you are also creating or recreating yourself as a photographer. Much of *This Too Shall Pass* is about you reflecting on your position. Could you talk a little bit more about what that process was like for you?

**DM:** It's interesting that you say this as much of this process wasn't premeditated. I started out with the naive ambition of trying to 'solve' these problems of representation within photography, which led to a period of intense frustration – or we could call it self-reflection. The process was tough but it was also very meaningful to me. As the work is about trying to navigate this impossible maze of the ethical issues of photography, as I had been trying to do, I couldn't present the final work without including the work process.

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**AvH:** You describe the project as a constructive failure.

Would you say that, in the midst of this sense of failing, you started to question both the photographic medium and your position as a photographer?

**DM:** I did. I also started to question the idea of representation itself. I wondered if I could ever even fully understand Yashar's story? And if I couldn't understand his story, how could I expect to communicate it? The failure of solving that problem became the starting point for what would become the final work, so in that sense it certainly was a constructive one. Suddenly the work transformed from trying to solve these issues of representation, to trying to address the difficulties of identifying with the situations of other individuals – while at the same time managing to tell Yashar's story in a way where I reflect on the difficulties of representing it.

**AvH:** With all the above said, in what photographic field would you place this work and your own practice at this time?

**DM:** All my current work originates from that moment in 2008 when I started questioning the notions of realism and representation in documentary photography. In a wider context, I would say that there is a field within art, not necessarily connected only to photography, where there is a profound reflexivity and exploration of what might be described as documentary.

**AvH:** Would you call this new journalism or new documentary?

**DM:** That would be a valid description in one sense, but at the same time it kind of sells it short because I believe that one of the core strengths of this kind of work is that it goes beyond the documentary. It can function as a document while simultaneously critiquing the document. It can use mediums such as photography while consistently critiquing the medium employed by reflecting on the instability of the meaning it carries. In the best cases, it forms complex narratives and multi-layered works that transcend a traditional documentary or journalistic reading.

**AvH:** It seems to me like photography itself, photography as phenomenon, promotes both critique and self-reflection. Why do you think that is?

**DM:** The medium has been promoted as a realistic representation of reality since its inception, and that is in direct conflict with how the meaning of a photograph is renegotiated in every single context it is viewed. For me, this conflict makes photography especially interesting as a way to examine reality while simultaneously question the very idea of realism.

**AvH:** I assume that there could be individuals critiquing the way you are working, as you are blending journalistic or documentary questions with aesthetic ambitions. Some could argue that you should leave the documentary and fully embrace the aesthetic, or the other way around. So why are you deliberately putting yourself in harm's way?

**DM:** In a way, this work is a statement towards photography and towards my own background in photojournalism. This complex presentation was, from my perspective, the most truthful way I could address this subject. I can't exclude the fact that I am a photographer with a position of my own or that the work is the result of my process and my decisions, because they are all key elements in shaping the outcome and therefore need to be part of it. I can't simplify the work either, because I want whoever views it to be able to experience a similar confrontation with themselves and the limits of their perception as I did working through this entire process. That also connects it to what I was trying to achieve in *Purity*, where I wanted the viewer to get the opportunity to question their own prejudices, as I had needed to do. *This Too Shall Pass* is about the difficulties in understanding another person's story, and in a broader sense connected to the idea of migration. What it really says is that if it's almost impossible to fully comprehend the depth contained in the fate of only one individual – then how can we generalise about tens of thousands of human beings in sweeping political discussions, much less vote on who should be able to enter a country or not?



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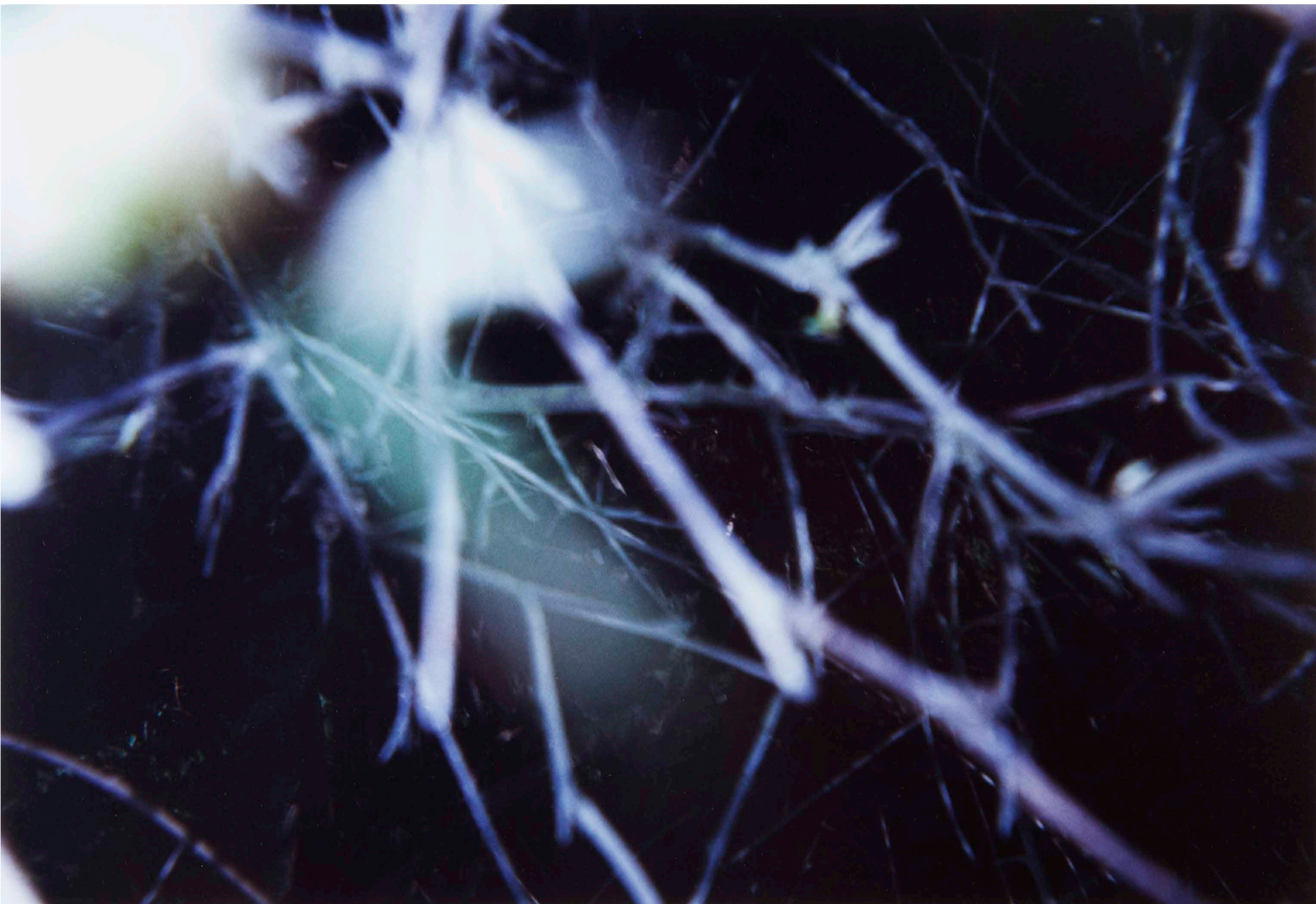
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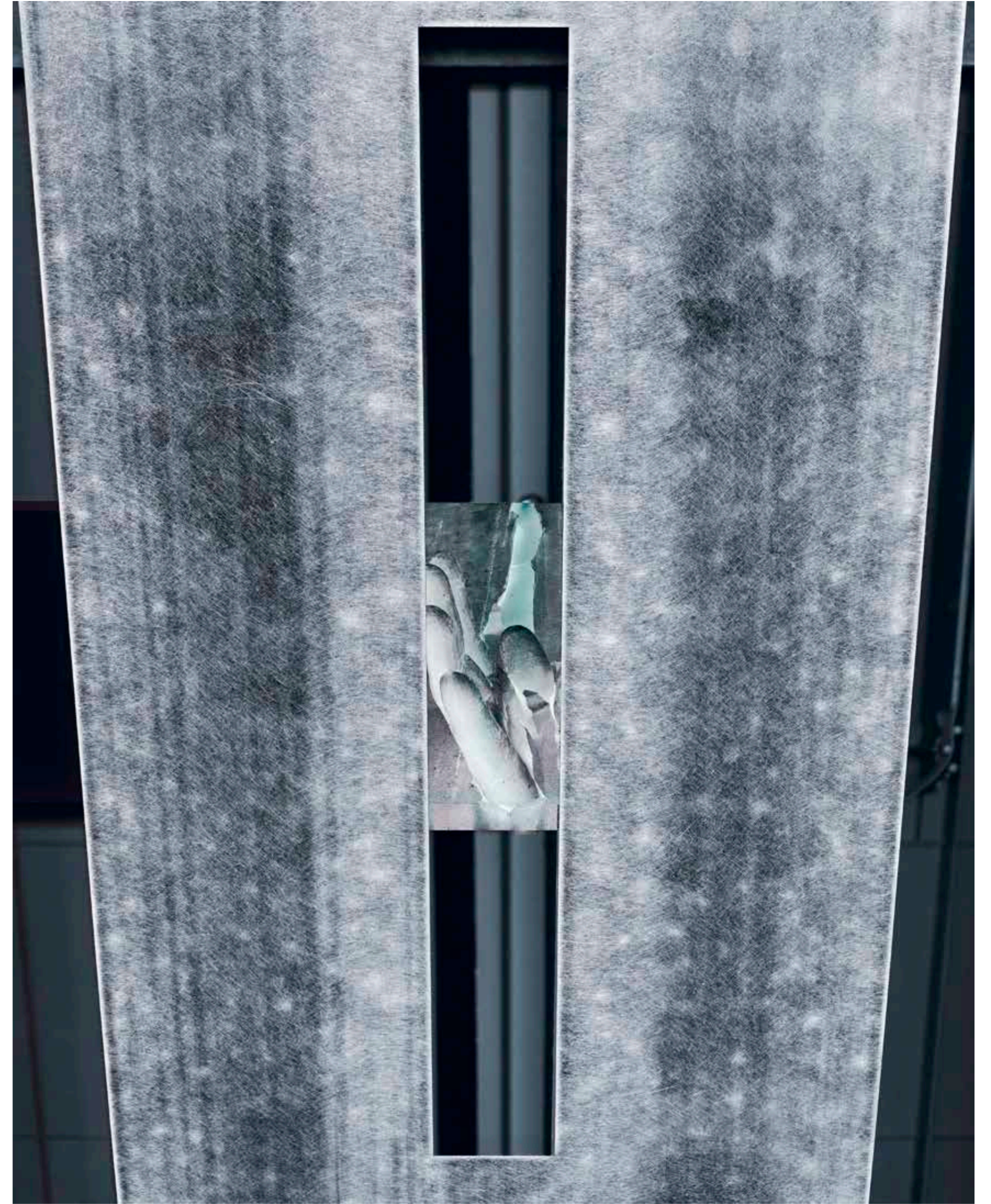
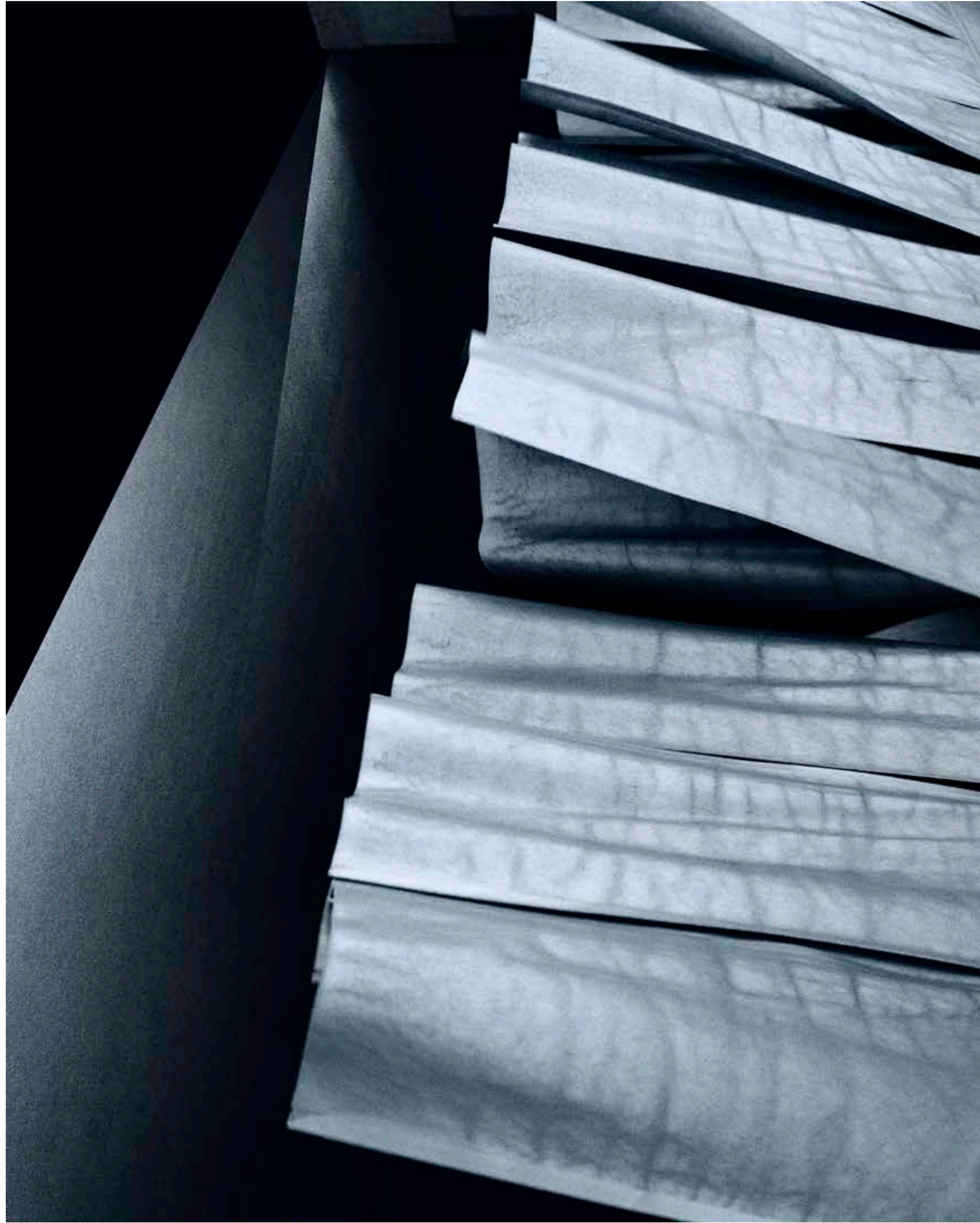


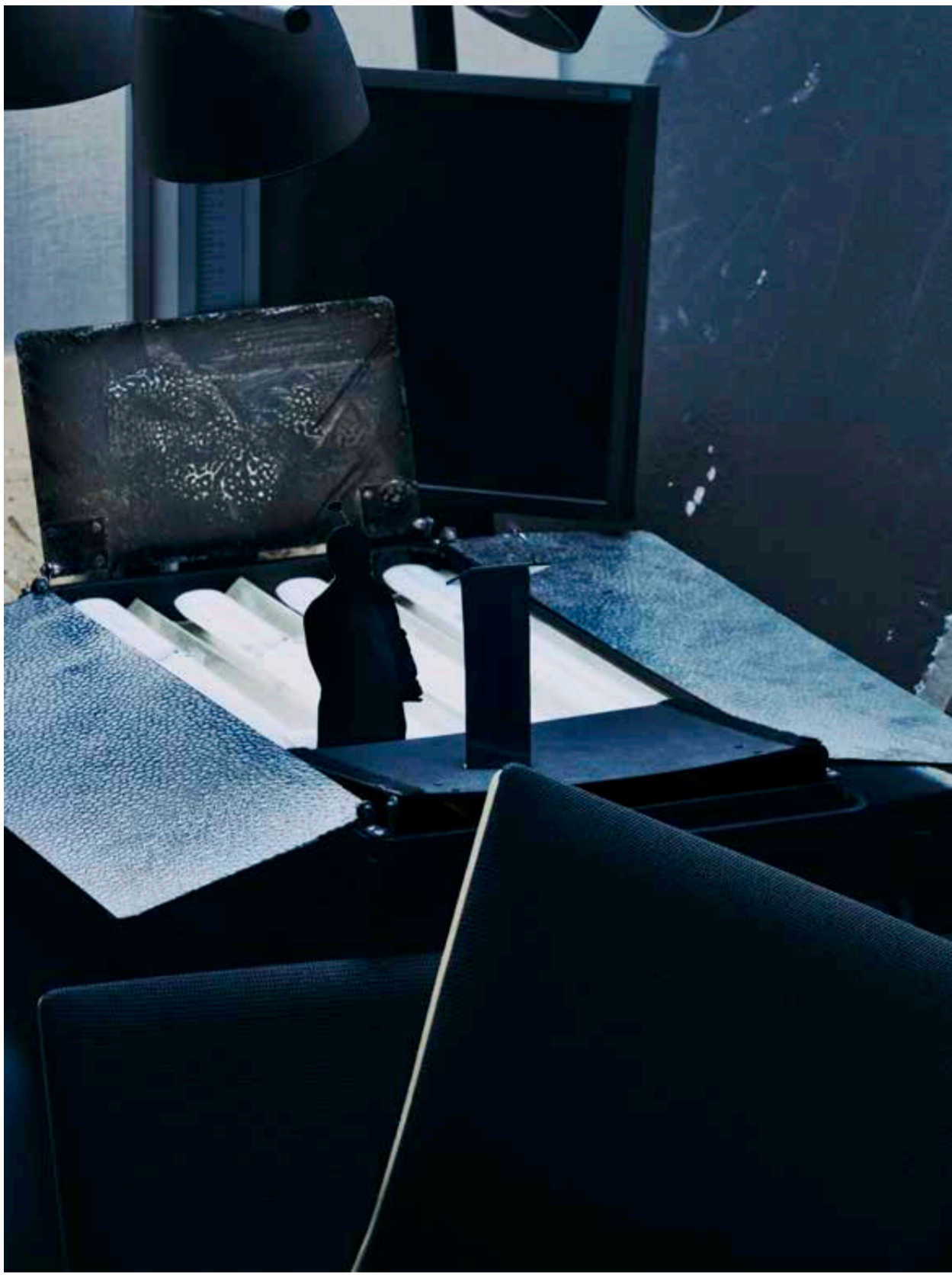


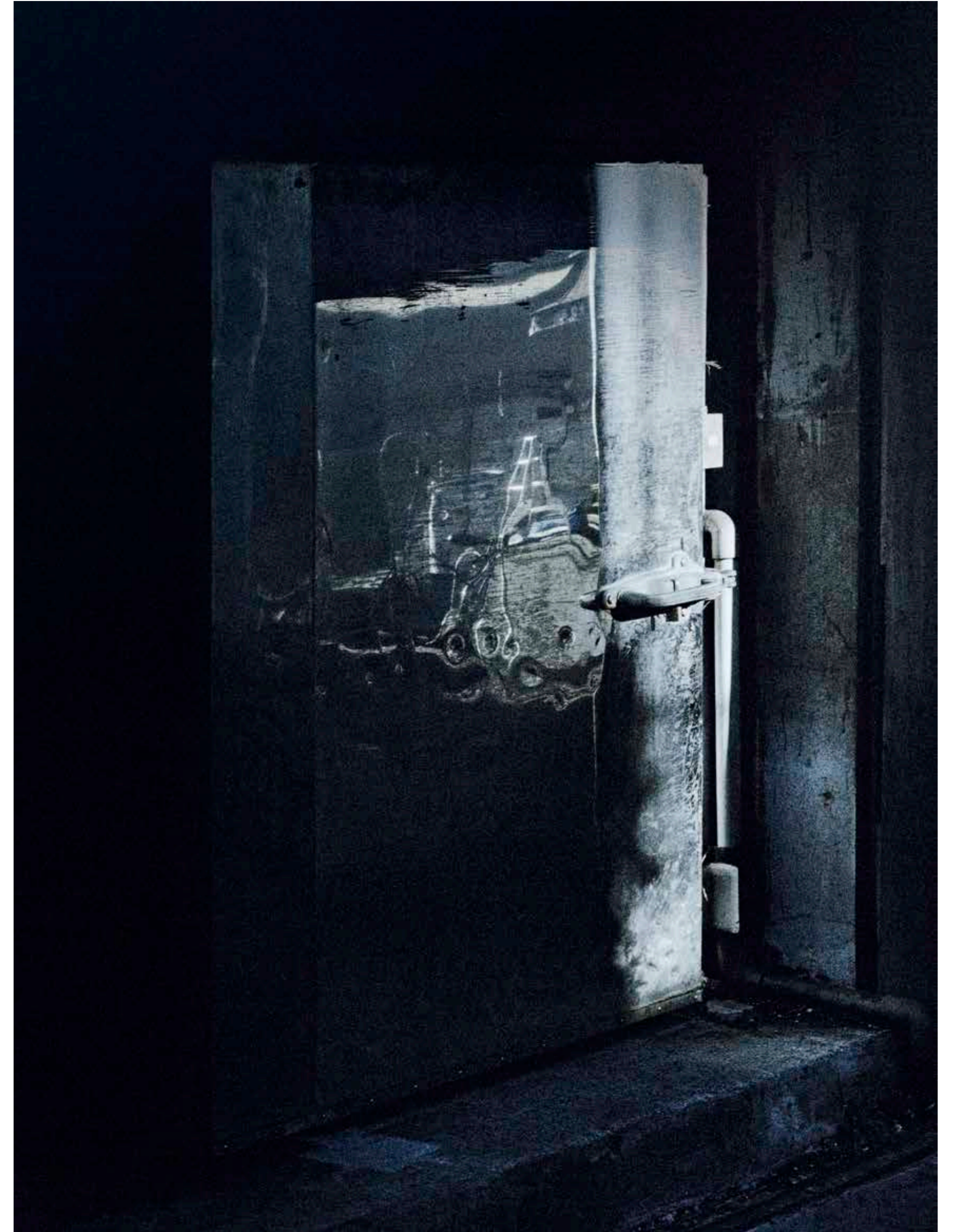
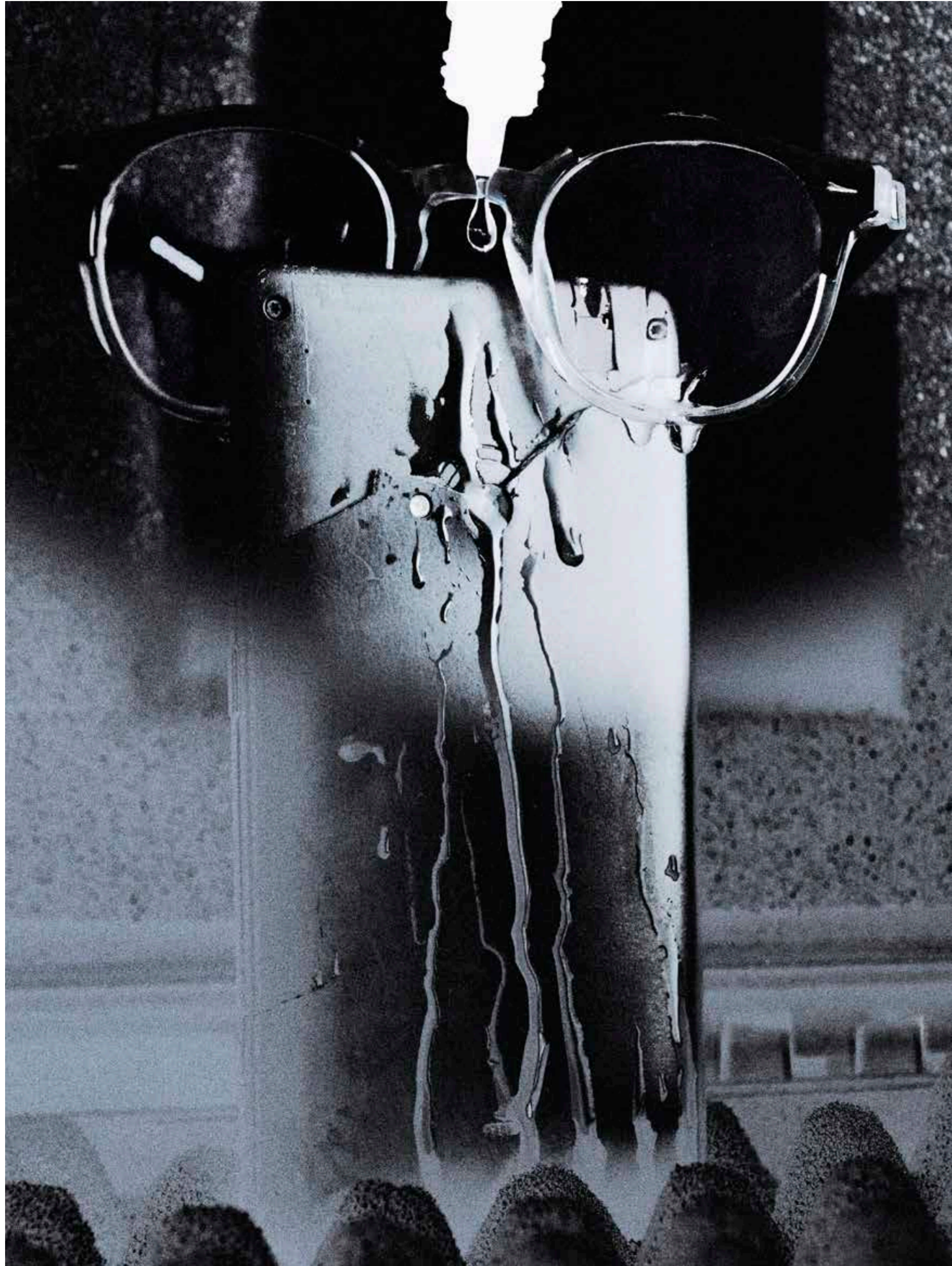


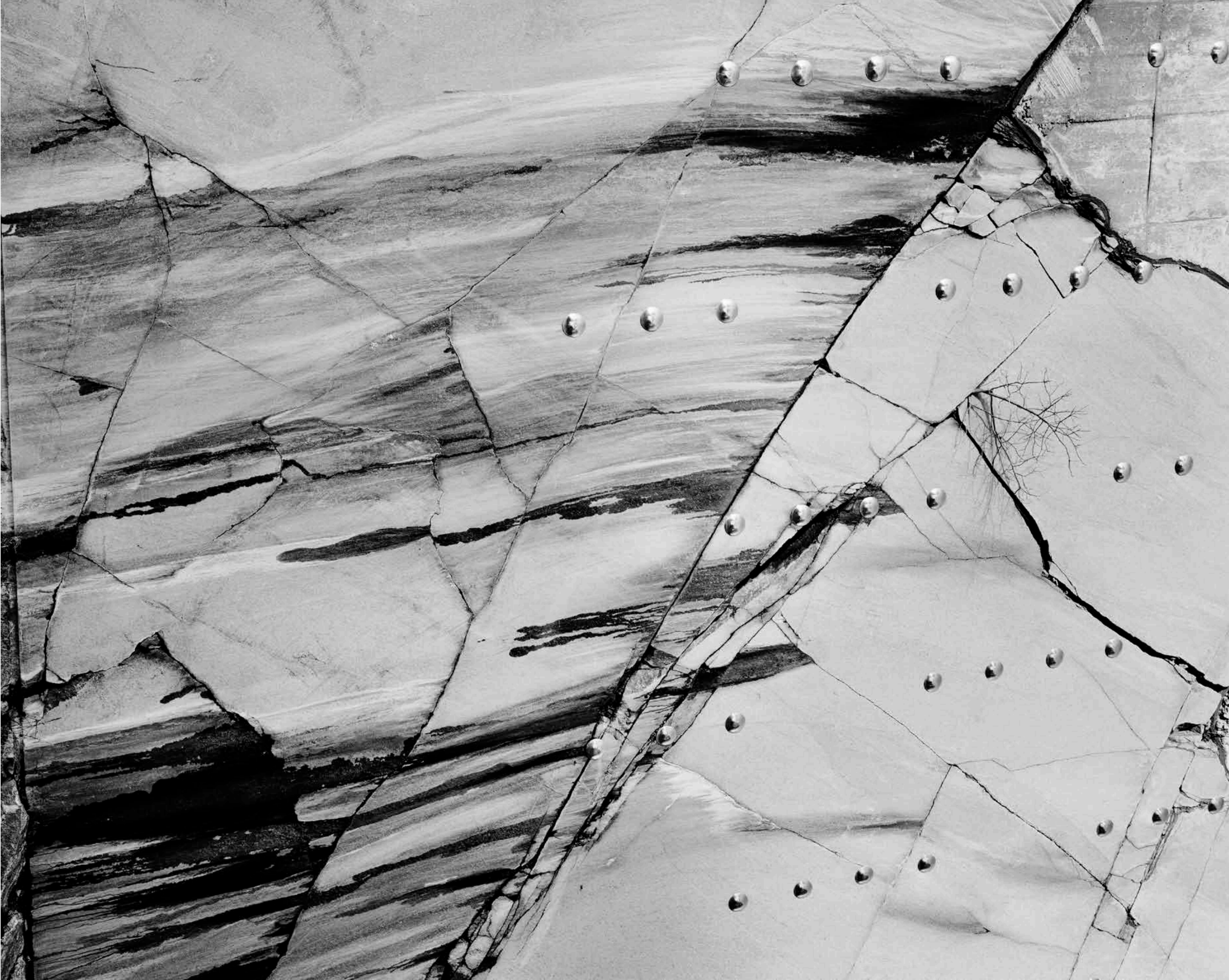




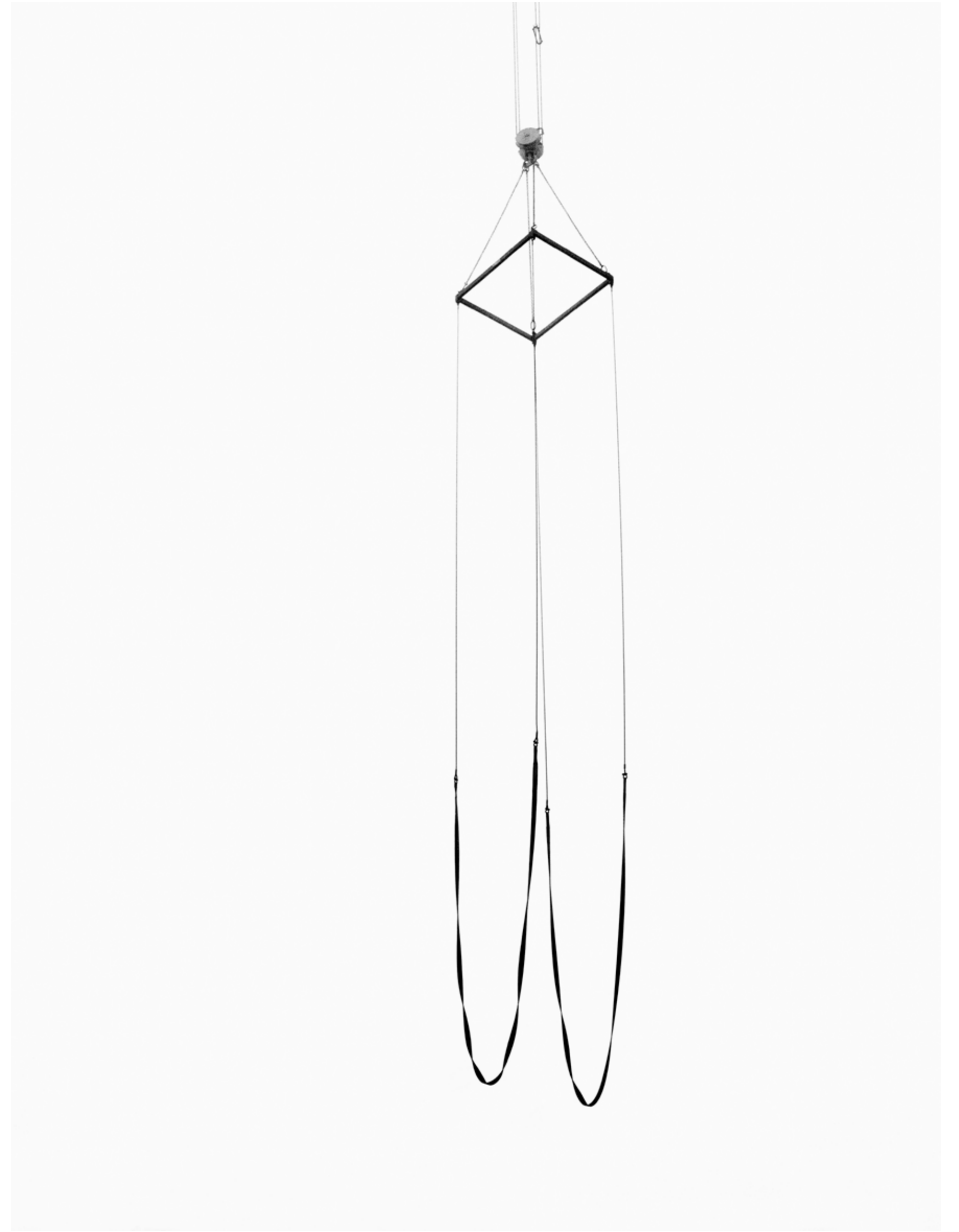
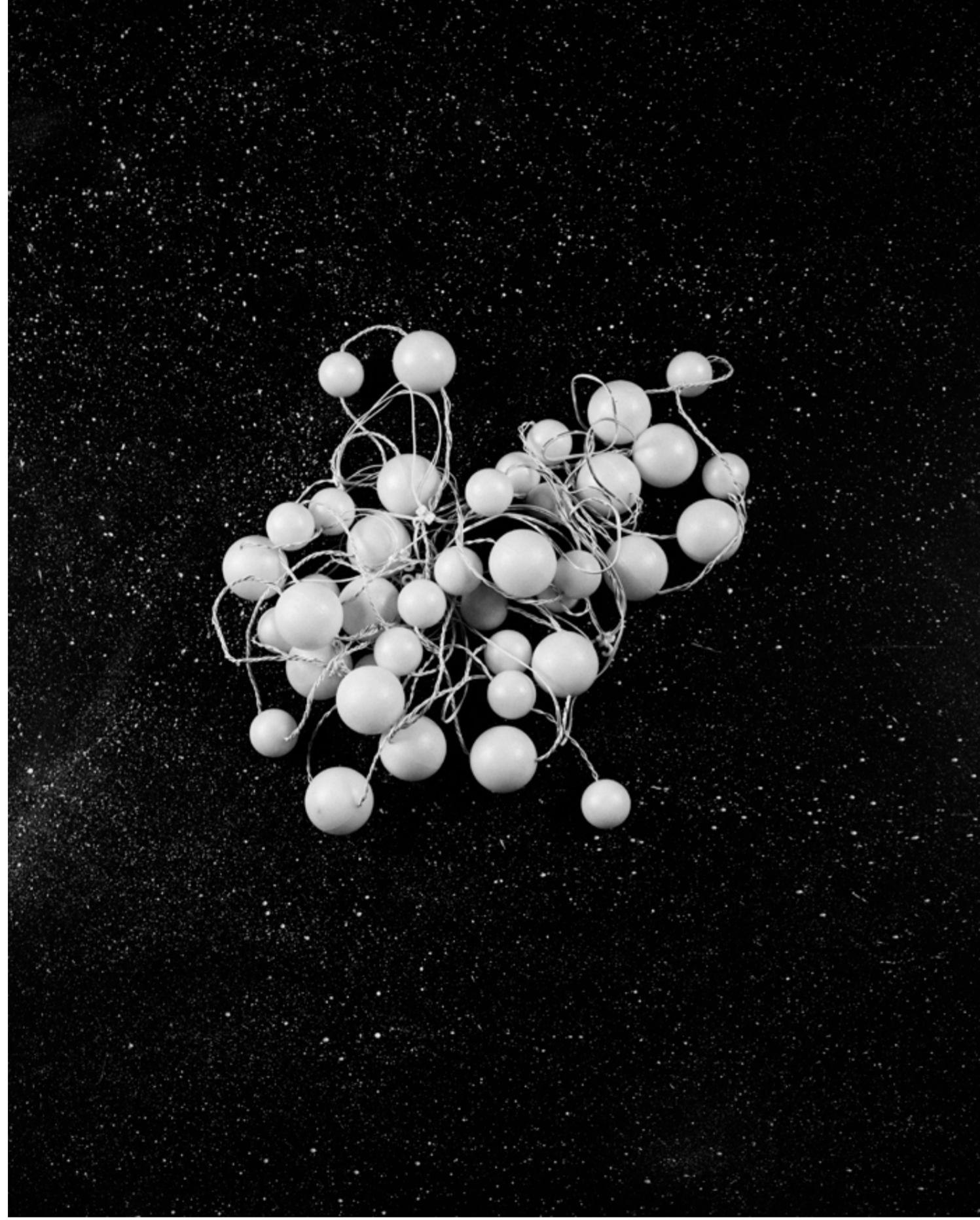




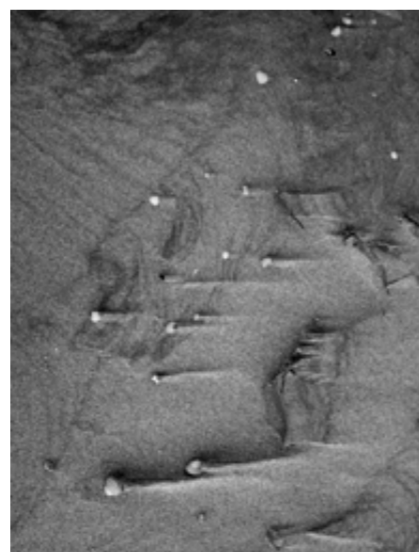
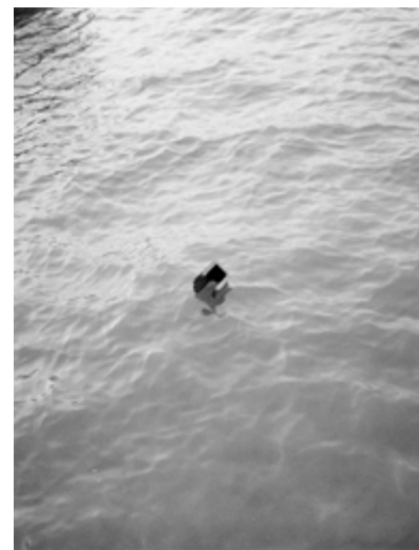
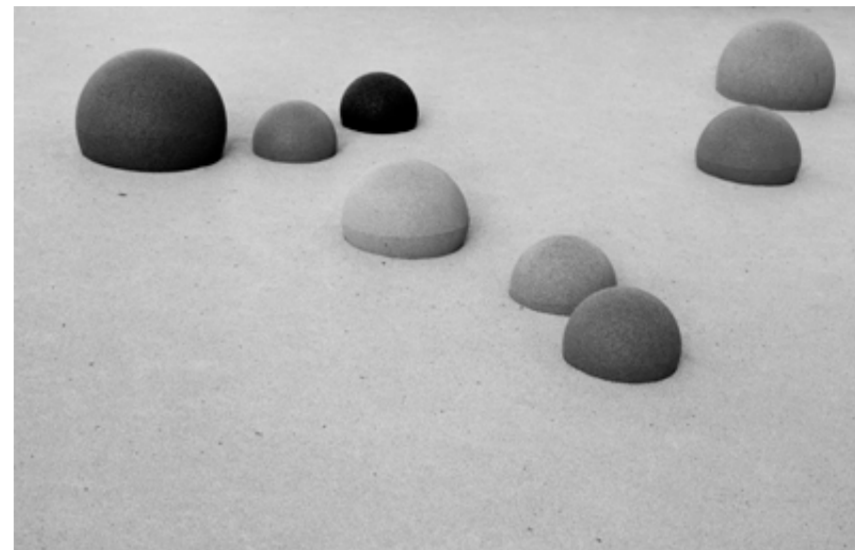
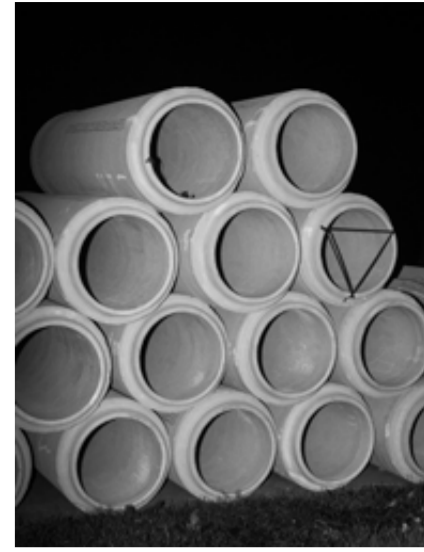














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