

What Do Photo- Sculptures Want?



**Spatial
Photographic Sculptures
in Contemporary Art**

**Laura van Rijs
August 2015**

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Photographic Sculptures
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August 17

“Like a hybrid plant, it retains characteristics of its precedents,
while bearing very different fruit.”¹

- Lucy Soutter

¹ Soutter, 2013, p. 28.

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Introduction

In 1979 American art critic and theorist Rosalind Krauss wrote “Sculpture in the Expanded Field” (1979), an article in which she maps the changed and stretched significance of the term ‘sculpture’. Around the sixties, and through the seventies as well, the word sculpture had become increasingly malleable and encompassed a set of works that swept aside the possibility of any categorization, covering an illimitable variety of works - from Brancusi’s columns and Richard Serra’s large-scale steel constructions, to the physical manipulations of sites and landscapes in the work of Robert Smithson. Sculpture was in danger of collapsing, Krauss argued.² This collapse has many similarities with today’s status of photography. With almost everyone being able to take a photograph, images around us everywhere we go and look, and photography that enters relationships with painting, cinema, installation, sculpture and performance, the question of where such hybrid photography resides seems to be more relevant than ever.

In the way sculpture turned away from pedestal bound work, the objects in question in this thesis likewise expand their presentational possibilities.³ Where the presentational forms of art photography predominantly concern the walls of museums and galleries, this thesis handles photographic art objects that abandon the plight to be bound to the wall. Lately there are many exhibitions that focused on this phenomenon. For example, *With Cinder Blocks We Flatten Our Photographs*, an exhibition on show in the Romer Young Gallery in San Francisco in 2013, showed objects that stress the tactility and spatiality of the photograph. *Fixed Variable* in the Hauser & Wirth gallery in New York in 2014 likewise displayed many spatial photographic works, exploring photography as both image and object. In addition, in the beginning of 2015 the Ezra and Cecile Zilkha Gallery in Connecticut hosted *Picture/Thing*, an exhibition that focused on the sculptural qualities of photography. The photographic works on show in these exhibitions were not primarily framed or hung; photographic paper is curved, piled, folded and moulded into three-dimensional forms. Images are printed on unconventional materials and framed in unfamiliar shapes, therewith lending the photograph a three-dimensional volume. Many of the works displayed are leaning against walls or other objects, or are placed freely in space as objects rather than as framed images on a wall. I could go on in trying to articulate what can be seen as examples of a current movement in contemporary art photography, in which artists continue to stretch the

² Krauss 1979, p. 33.

³ Morse 2010, p. 31.

medium's boundaries and therewith (direct or indirectly) raise questions about what photography could or should be.

My interest for such spatial photographic works stems from my involvement as a research-intern in the research project "Photographs & Preservation: How to save photographic artworks for the future?" initiated by the Stedelijk Museum in collaboration with the University of Leiden.⁴ This research project focuses on a corpus of post-1960 photographic works in which different materials are combined or where unconventional techniques were used.⁵ While working on an inventory of relevant works that are located in the modern art collections of Dutch museums, I got more interested in studying and researching photographic artworks from a material perspective. In particular the work of contemporary artists that experiment with photography's three-dimensional possibilities, seems to come along with testing and redefining the physical and material characteristics of the medium.

Take for example *Façade* (2014) (Fig. 1) on show in *Picture/Thing*. Here we see three styrofoam blocks of various sizes, standing straight up and situated in the middle of the space. Each block is plastered with a photograph, showing dark grey suits, nicely steamed, hanging behind one another. The smooth and shiny surface of the photograph is interrupted by the wrinkles of transparent cellophane foil, wrapped around the entire blocks. In between, two plexiglas plates are placed. Both are printed with pictures and at the same time they reflect the images and materials that surround them. On top of, next to, and standing against these divers entities, five bricks are precisely placed. This unorthodox combination of materials and techniques was created in 2014, by Dutch artist Anouk Kruithof. What is this thing we are looking at? It could be argued that it is photography, a sculpture, a collage, or perhaps we should conceive it as something that is floating in between.

The photographic works examined in this thesis specifically oscillate between these realms of photography and sculpture, herewith continually going up and down between the flatness of photography and the spatiality of sculpture, between the two-dimensional and the three-dimensional. This is photography that lends, takes, uses and applies the meaningful features and properties of other arts, herewith creating new hybrid photographic works that transcend our classic notion of the medium photography. To be more precise, the spatial appearance that

⁴ This research is part of the Science4Arts program from the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO) and takes place over a period of four years (2012-2016).

⁵ Because of the often complex, physical composition, the works are subject to undesired chemical interactions and material change. This, in addition to the fact that photographs themselves are already subject to a fairly rapid aging process, makes that the photo-works in question are deteriorating, discolouring and falling apart. The aim of the research project is to generate new insights into conservation and preservation issues of such photographic artworks.

is dealt with in this thesis is that of a flat photographic image which has been turned into a three-dimensional object, either through folding, mounting, printing or framing it in such manner that the photograph becomes a spatial object. In their attempt to take on a sculptural dimension, these works often demonstrate a variety of used techniques and materials. *Façade* is an example of such a work, combining elements of photography, sculpture and installation, collage and assemblage. *Sculptural situation*, the subtitle of Kruithof's work, is indeed insinuating this artwork is *like* a sculpture - not really a sculpture, but rather occupying a place near it.

After doing research and comparing various examples of spatial photographic works, I selected photographic works created by Anouk Kruithof and American artist Letha Wilson as the primary research objects for this thesis. The artworks discussed are not similar in their materials or techniques used; in fact they all come into being under different circumstances. However, their works display a vision on materiality and three-dimensionality of photography that is representative for this experimental attitude towards the use of different materials and techniques, resulting in complex spatial photographic works that I will now call photo-sculptures. In addition, Kruithof's and Wilson's work is complemented with *Lighter*, an ongoing series created by German artist Wolfgang Tillmans. The *Lighter* works balance between flatness and spatiality. This series therefore acts as an intermediate stage between a flat photograph and spatial photo-sculpture.

The relationship between photography and sculpture goes a long way back. In fact, the interaction between the two practices is set in stone since photography's inception. In the early days, statues and sculptures were grateful, patient objects for the early camera's long exposure times.⁶ Although framing sculpture partly functioned as documenting the (fairly) immobile objects, through reproducing them by means of photographs one was also able to determine and control the ways of perceiving and interpreting sculptures formally and aesthetically.⁷ While on the one hand, sculpture and photography are separate terms and categories, boundaries between the two can thus become blurred when representations of sculptures end up being the creative substitutes for their originals.⁸ This convergence of the relationship between photography and sculpture, between image and object, becomes even more apparent when photographs themselves move into the direction of sculptural objects.

⁶ Exhibition text of *The Original Copy: Photography of Sculpture, 1939 to Today* hosted in 2010 by the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Retrieved from: <http://www.moma.org/visit/calendar/exhibitions/970>

⁷ Johnson 1998, pp. 1-19.

⁸ Johnson 1998, p. 13.

In theorizing the photographic medium the relation between other disciplines is firmly acknowledged. There is widely published on the connection between photography and painting for example, or the overlapping characteristics between photography and cinema. However, when it comes to the categories of sculpture and photography, hybrid photographic works that take on spatial qualities that are on a par with sculpture appear to be underexposed. The primary objective of this research is to fill this gap and to contribute to existing reflections on photography as an expanded practice. Consequently, an additional goal is to clarify and to provide an understanding of photographic sculptures. Central to this study is the following question: With regard to three-dimensional photographic sculptures, how is the shift from a two-dimensional image towards a three-dimensional object of consequence for understanding these kind of works in photographic terms, such as representation, indexicality and transparency?

It is precisely this dual distinction between image on the one hand and object on the other hand, that is particularly present in the photo-sculptures that are central to this thesis. Both the images they bear as well as their presence as three-dimensional objects in space, form the fundamental aspects to their physical existence, and, as will be argued, are part of the work's content as well. These works of art are playing across the boundaries of visual qualities and spatial qualities, herewith enforcing that both elements deserve to be further investigated rather than only one.

The research is based on a combination of textual, visual and material analyses. Since there is no explicit literature on the subject matter, the phenomenon will be explained through diverse angles. The photo-sculptures are like a junction where different artistic periods, media, techniques and materials meet. On the one hand the research will rest upon existing theories of photography. On the other hand it will specifically build on the relationships between photography and other spatial disciplines such as sculpture and installation art, each bringing their own theorization.

While photography is often primarily emphasized for its depictive qualities, the first chapter of this thesis investigates what characterizes photographs as spatial objects. The first part is focused on the physical aspects of the photographic object, which are further investigated by existing theories on the materiality of photography. In this regard, the anthology *Photographs, Objects, Histories: on the Materiality of Images* (2004), edited by Elizabeth Edwards and Janice Hart, forms a valuable source to investigate this. Although the essays derive from an anthropological perspective, the volume provides a useful way to

dissect the different layers of what constitutes a photograph's materiality. Likewise Geoffrey Batchen's writing on the ways in which vernacular photographs can be experienced as objects through their presentational forms, offers further guidance to regard photography as image, material and spatial object at the same time. The second part concentrates on this spatiality. An interesting publication that helps to contribute to an understanding of the spatiality of photo-sculptures in particular is *Take Place: Photography and Place from Multiple Perspectives* (2009). Among other issues, the authors of this volume reflect on photographs that are integrated in installations and therefore enforce another experience of the notion of place in and of the photograph. Furthermore, Anja Novak's unpublished PhD dissertation *Ruimte voor Beleving (Space for Experience)* (2010), on installation art and the experiences of the spectator, helps to compare the differences in the viewer's experience of 'flat' photographic images on the one hand and spatial photo-sculptures on the other hand.

The second chapter places the photo-sculptures of this thesis in a theoretical context by investigating in what ways photo-sculptures position themselves within the debate on photography as an expanded field. Inevitably this chapter touches upon George Baker's "Photography's Expanding Field" (2005). His article forms the basis for investigating to what extent the specific photo-sculptures demonstrate an expanded practice. However, instead of simply applying Baker's philosophy, this chapter likewise explores Lucy Soutter's slightly adapted version of an expanding field of photography. Her model allows for an inclusion of traditional properties of photography while at the same time expanding other characteristics. As a result of this, the selected photo-sculptures are examined as operating in traditional photographic manner on the one hand and expanding the medium on the other hand.

This combination of both historical elements and contemporary components is what is at issue in the third and last chapter of this research. Although it appears that loosening photography's borders, as seen in photo-sculptures, is a recent development, looking back into the past shines new light on this assumption. This third chapter is primarily a comparison between contemporary photo-sculptures and *Photography into Sculpture*, an exhibition from the seventies exploring similar works of art that balance on the borders of both sculpture and photography. Through this comparison it is explored in what ways the current exploration of three-dimensionality within photography differs from this previous similar movement. It therewith stresses the importance of context to understand the meaning production of such works.

The material and physical composition of the photo-sculptures will act as a consistent factor throughout the research, linking the three chapters. Throughout the research, the

significance of the materiality is constantly questioned to get grip on understanding the artwork. The photographic sculptures in this thesis are thus viewed from different perspectives and from different directions, herewith framing and mapping its characteristics and significance. Through defining their historical roots, through comparisons and combinations, this research hopes to contribute to a better understanding of this current tendency in photography.

1. Photography's Spatial Qualities: Between Image and Object.

As the photographic medium is assumed to be merely a depictive device, our interpreting and understanding the meaning of a photograph is primarily focused on the visual image and the subject it represents. It is therefore no surprise that photography's representational character has determined the predominant way of looking at, investigating, writing about and comprehending the medium and its content. However, that photographs are themselves matter, functioning as material objects in time and space is often neglected. Consequently, central to this first chapter is exposing the photograph as both image and object. This chapter investigates the medium's shift from flat to spatial by answering the question what characterizes photographs as spatial objects, next to bearing images. The first part focuses on powerful representational features of the photographic image. This part examines which qualities of photography ensure that photographs are mainly perceived as images and therewith suppress the presence of the photograph's surface. In turn, this surface of the photograph is further explored to investigate what aspects of surface can contribute to the interpretation of an image and its content.

The second part focuses on photography in the domain of contemporary art. This part focuses on how contemporary photographic artworks manifest themselves as spatial objects with a notable surface. From a seemingly flat and immaterial medium, photography is here considered as blurring and expanding its own boundaries by entering the three-dimensional domain. What follows is an exploration of works in which materiality and three-dimensionality is more radically exploited through the use of presentational forms and additional materials. These works seem to converge with spatial disciplines such as sculpture and installation, therewith bringing the visual, the material and spatial closer together.

1.1 Photographic tradition: Image and Surface

1.1.1 Photography's Image: The Dominance of Depiction

Photography's function to record is in its very nature. However, there is no image without material support to this image, even if it means this support is a digital screen.⁹ This might seem obvious but the photograph's physical surface is often ignored in favour of the thing it depicts. Photo-historian Geoffrey Batchen explains this as follows: "In order to see what the photograph is 'of' we must first suppress our consciousness of what the photograph 'is' in

⁹ Mitchell 2005, p. 108.

material terms”.¹⁰ Seeing the thing that is represented by a photograph thus paradoxically means overlooking its physical surface.

Although we might be aware that the image-content of a photograph is not everything, it surely gives us the illusion that it actually is. Mostly because in traditional sense a photograph is often a very thin and flat piece of paper whose most primary function is to carry an image of something. It is therefore not unusual that its materiality is easily overlooked. However, the actual mechanisms that ensure that image and image-content seem to be the primary functions of a photograph are photography’s indexicality, its transparency, and its reproducible character.

In the first place this focus on image and image content derives from our faith in photography’s ability to create a truthful impression of the world out there. From photography’s birth in 1839, innumerable writers have described or claimed photography’s ability to create a direct and faithful imprint of the object that was once in front of the camera. One of the most famous and most cited statements to affirm this claim might be that of Roland Barthes’ in his *Camera Lucida*: “...in Photography I can never deny that the thing has been there”.¹¹ Barthes herewith points to photography’s inherent indexicality, where there always seems to be a causal relationship between that what is depicted in the photograph and that what was happening in front of the camera, the referent. Whilst nowadays scholars and beholders have become very critical and inquisitive towards the construction that can hide behind a seemingly real, objective and truthful photograph, the fact that it can translate the world with a high level of realism is still very convincing and probably the reason for most photographs to be made (and believed).

Secondly, the high degree of realism is simultaneously linked with photography’s transparent character. Photographs are often defined as more transparent than any other medium whatsoever; in some magical sense they seduce the viewer to experience the very thing that is depicted, rather than a representation of it. It is not a coincidence that it is the windowpane and the landscape behind it that are often used as the metaphor to explain what is at work here: in order to see the landscape we ignore the glass and in order to see the glass we automatically blur the landscape on our retina. Photographs and their supporting surface function likewise; in order to see the image we must suppress our view on the material surface that carries the image and in order to see the surface, the image is pushed backwards by changing our focus. It thus shows that we cannot see both at the same time. Hilde van Gelder and Helen Westgeest summarize this theory on the basis of a striking example; they

¹⁰ Batchen 1997, p. 2.

¹¹ Barthes 2000 [1981], p. 76.

state that we tend to say “‘This is a painting of the Pantheon in Rome painted by...’”, versus “‘This is the Pantheon in Rome’”.¹² The latter sentence reveals that we often leave out the fact that it is a photographic copy we are looking at, a surface carrying an image. We do not look *at* photographs, but rather look *through* them. In contrast to the photograph's support, a painting's canvas or paper for instance, firmly holds a subsequent structure of brushstrokes and layers of paint. Moving images in their turn, go up in smoke when the projection is turned off and they loose the connection to their interface. Photographic images however, have a unique directness to their support; image and support are inseparable and laminated together.¹³

Finally, image content appears to be of great importance through photography's easily reproduction. While image and support seem laminated together, the possibility of reproducing the image ensures that material aspects appear of lesser importance. In *Philosophy of Photography* Villem Flusser states that “... as an object, as a thing, the photograph is practically without value...” Flusser explains that the significance of an image is in the information that it carries ‘in’ its surface. This information can easily be conveyed to another surface by means of reproduction, herewith demonstrating the unimportance of the material object.¹⁴ For instance, slides can be printed as colour photographs, therewith loosing their initial surface while still conveying the same image. A newspaper photograph may have come into existence by means of a digital photo camera, once printed in the physical paper the image and message it illustrates is still the same while its material support has changed.

To conclude we can say that photography's truthful, transparent and reproducible character encourages a conception in which the photograph as an object is of lesser value. Whether photographs manifest themselves as factual evidence in newspapers, as advertisements that attempt to convince us, as snapshots that are the traces of private memories in a family album, or are the result of artistic expression, it is the visual content of the image that seems to carry the valuable information. In this view, the surface is more or less acting as an information carrier and less as valuable material. Does all this imply that a photograph is thus principally a silent surface with a bustling image? To answer this question it seems necessary to imply the inverse: ignore the image in order to see what significant information is to be found in and on the material surface.

¹² Van Gelder & Westgeest 2011, p. 55.

¹³ Barthes 2000 [1981], p. 6.

¹⁴ Flusser 2000 [1983], p. 49-56.

1.1.2 Photography's Surface: Physicality under Scrutiny

What exactly is this material surface that provides us the photographic image? This materiality can be discussed in many regards, from technical origins (films, negatives, grains or pixels, pieces of paper or lightening screens and tonal range), to formal qualities (weight, depth, thickness, size and shape), to tactility (texture, touch and smell) and to references of a former use and life (scratches, cracks, dirt and dust, blunted corners, fading tonal range, captions or texts on the back of photographs).¹⁵ Paradoxically, all these elements that are inevitable for a photographic image to exist and to be kept, are mostly suppressed in the act of beholding the image.

This would indeed imply that the physical surface of photographs is relatively unimportant, merely having a supporting function. This thinking is likewise encouraged by the little substantial research that there is to be found about photography and its physical meaning. In the same way viewers suppress the material construction of a photograph in order to see the image, photographic theory is, according to photo-historian Elizabeth Edwards, dominated by representation, revolving around (aforementioned) concepts such as realism, referent, and index and icon.¹⁶ Leaving the image for what it is and to further read and analyse the material surface and object qualities of the photograph is something one comes across scarcely in writings on photography. If the materiality of photographs is discussed, this is almost always in relation to the qualitative 'fine print' or with 'conservation concerns'.¹⁷ That the photographic surface could be considered to be an important information carrier that, next to image-content, provides the image with (latent) content is something that not many have addressed.

Nevertheless, it seems there is an increased attention for the materiality of photographs in relation to the meaning and significance of the image. It is argued that this increase has its roots in a larger context of anthropology and cultural studies, since in recent years these fields of study showed a 'material turn' in which the role of material objects became central in framing social and cultural relationships.¹⁸ This focus on material objects likewise influenced image studies and writing about photographs as material objects.¹⁹ For example, W. J. T. Mitchell's volume *What Do Pictures Want* (2005) not only explores the significance of pictures from a visual perspective but also investigates the power of material objects in our visual culture. In Mitchell's treatise objects are active social players that "...can

¹⁵ Barthes 2000 [1981], Van Lier 2007 [1983], Batchen 2000, Elkins 2011, Edwards & Hart 2004, Sassoon 2004.

¹⁶ Edwards 2012, p. 225.

¹⁷ Edwards & Hart 2004, p. 2.

¹⁸ Mitchell 2005, p. 111, Edwards & Hart 2004, p. 3-4, Breitbach 2011, p. 32.

¹⁹ Mitchell 2005, p. 111, Edwards & Hart 2004, p. 3-4, Breitbach 2011, p. 32.

play the role of subjects”, rather than the role of objective and neutral supports. In contrast to Mitchell, who serves his arguments on the basis of specific case studies, Julia Breitbach has been writing on photography's objecthood with a more conceptual and theoretical approach. Drawing on the 'thing theory' of Bill Brown, she states that photographic images have a dual identity in which they are both *objects* with a clear function and use, as well as *things* that obstruct and disguise meaning. The photographic *object* here, is seen as evident, omnipresent and therefore often feels indistinct in ways that Flusser addressed. The photo as *thing* reveals itself when obvious function and use, for any reason, are put to a hold. Breitbach remarks for instance, that this is the case in deliberate exploitation of the photograph's common use and function by artists. Another example she gives, relates to a less public domain, that of the private archive in which domestic photographs are housed. The photo as unvalued, unnoticed, object is here often turned into a specific, particular thing, infused with 'burning significance'.²⁰

It is remarkable that it is this private domain that is elected more frequently as the discourse in which to explore the materiality and object qualities of photographs. With his slight anthropological approach, Geoffrey Batchen is one of the few writers in the field of photography who tried to take into account the materiality of photographs in relation to their meaning. In *Each Wild Idea* (2000) he specifically addresses material properties of various vernacular photographs, a field that according to Batchen is still largely excluded from critical attention. He describes and analyses the striking volume, tactility and physical presence of, amongst other things, cased daguerreotypes, overpainted tintypes, photographic jewellery and album collages. Batchen adds that it is specifically these domestic photographs that draw our attention to their “morphology”, that is to say their outer shape, structure and construction, herewith directing us not (only) to the image but to its object-being as well.²¹ To use two of Batchen's examples: Daguerreotypes need to be held in the right angle in order for its mirroring and shiny surface to unfold the image. Furthermore, their decorated cases combine a range of materials that lend them weight. Daguerreotypes thus collapse “...sight and touch, inside and outside, into the same perceptual experience”.²² Another example Batchen highlights are Mexican *fotoesculturas*, in which hand-coloured photographic portraits are turned into almost sculptural objects through their double-glazing and decorative, wooden, frames. The photograph of a *fotoescultura* is “...something one looks at rather than through, as an opaque icon whose significance rests on ritual rather than visual

²⁰ Breitbach 2011, p. 37.

²¹ Batchen 2000, p. 60.

²² Batchen 2000, p. 60.

truth.”²³ Batchen concludes that “...vernacular photographs choose not to declare their own transparency to the world they picture.”²⁴ The explicit presence of other materials (glass, wood, metal, paint, leather, hair, etc), of specific frames and mountings, obstruct the apparent transparent nature of the photographic image. Looking, experiencing and understanding the photograph thus not only comprises absorbing the image; it exceeds the edges of the actual image, incorporating additional materials that are of complementary, or even equal, importance.

Another key contributor to writings on photography’s material object is a collection of essays titled *Photographs, Objects, Histories: On the Materiality of Images* (2004). This volume seems to build further on the thinking of Batchen and likewise investigates the photographic object as social and cultural interactor rather than as mere index of a visual truth.²⁵ Editors Elizabeth Edwards and Janice Hart discuss the relation between a photograph and its support in the light of historical photographs that find themselves in broader realms, ranging from the domestic, the museum and library, to the political. Picture and support are explored in more depth by dissecting three concepts that interrelate with each other and together form the materiality of the photograph. The first are the technical and physical choices that result in the actual image carrier (Paper + resulting surface effects). The second is the style or manner with which the photograph is put to display (presentational forms). The third are “the physical traces of usage and time”.²⁶ All three together influence and determine the ways in which image content is conveyed to the viewer. It is this viewer that directly brings up a fourth component: something the authors call the ‘embodied experience’ of the viewer. They argue that different material forms ask for different acts of viewing, using and functioning, each adding to the significance of the photograph.²⁷

The four components together should be taken into account as part of the information that is conveyed through the photograph. Although a simple reproduction of a physical photograph can translate the image and subject content, proving Flusser he is right for a great deal of images, it would also easily reveal that important material properties are lost in the process. To begin with, just like every image is a direct product of intention (choosing camera, lens, cropping etc.), so is its form.²⁸ To create a physical image one needs to choose from an immense variety of materials that will carry the image. Since every choice is based

²³ Batchen 2000, p. 74-76.

²⁴ Batchen 2000, p. 76.

²⁵ Edwards & Hart 2004.

²⁶ Edwards & Hart 2004, p. 3.

²⁷ Edwards & Hart 2004, p. 6.

²⁸ Edwards & Hart 2004, p. 2.

on certain objectives, meant for a specific audience, use, function and message, it is almost impossible to state that these materials will only have a neutral supporting function.²⁹

Furthermore, traceable technical processes, original size, tonal range, cropping instructions or texts on the back of the original photographic object, are material factors that could tell us more about the ways in which images were put to use socially and historically. For example, Edwards and Hart indicate that such information provides clues to whether certain photos formed important objects in, for instance, the domestic sphere or whether they mainly have led an institutional life.³⁰

It follows that these objectives, audiences, uses, functions and messages can all be 'read' and 'identified'. It is hard to replicate this information and it could easily get lost in reproduction or digital translation processes.³¹ Hence, the material composition is essential to the existence of photographic meaning. It means that in many cases photographs should be considered as less easily replaceable than one might think at first. Some in fact are single objects with an irreproducible character.

1.2 Photography off-the-wall: Surface Interventions

1.2.1 Piercing Superflatness

Where the above-mentioned authors primarily focused on photographic objects that expose the social and cultural relationships in everyday life, the next part considers the object qualities of photographs from an artistic perspective, occupying the domain of contemporary art. Edwards' and Hart's division, of image carrier on the one hand and presentational form on the other hand, forms a useful way to explore this further. The viewer's 'bodily experience' is simultaneously linked to it.³²

In many cases, artistic photographs come into being with relatively standard products. Photographs are very often printed on glossy, satin or mat finished papers. The frame follows from the necessity to hang and protect the image. Another common way to do so is to mount the print on dibond or aluminium plates, making the prints less vulnerable to wrinkles and damages and as a way to simplify the hanging. Although these choices often derive from a creative thought, the main objective of the chosen paper and presentation method is to bring forward the pictorial qualities of the photograph. By contrast, the following examples

²⁹ Edwards & Hart 2004, p. 11.

³⁰ Edwards & Hart 2004, p. 4

³¹ Sassoon 2004, p. 200.

³² The concept of physical traces of usage and time is left out of consideration here. It finds its way back in a closing recommendation to be found in the epilogue of this thesis.

highlight artists whose selection for paper, printing and presentation can be seen as conscious conceptual choices that not only support the image but also link the materiality of their work to the content of the image.

Someone who deliberately plays with the printing and presentation of his work is German artist Wolfgang Tillmans. The artist combines abstract images, together with portraits, landscapes, still-lives and townscapes. He prints and presents them alternately as large scale unprotected ink-jet prints, as framed chromogenic prints, small postcard format pictures pinned to the wall, or as more sculptural works that take up space. Although Tillmans' way of putting each image on the wall is strict and carefully controlled, the end result is playful. In essence no exhibition design is identical, though each time again the same recognizable visual system arises in which the artist plays with scale, rhythm, symmetry, asymmetry, grids or rows, with pairs or in sequence, side by side, and then again a single, isolated picture.

Through experimenting with different materials, techniques, forms and sizes in an overall installation, Tillmans knows to highlight the specific material characteristics of each work. For example, framing his images creates a certain distance and emphasizes the photograph as a constructed object.³³ On the contrary, in hanging an unframed print directly onto the wall, Tillmans highlights the fragility and direct presence of the work. He consciously deploys these properties in order to bestow the image with an extra layer of meaning. Rather than only seeing a representation of something, or just photographic paper as support of that representation, Tillmans creates awareness about the physical qualities of the photographic print, herewith highlighting that photography is an object.

This focus on materiality and object can be seen as a red thread through Tillman's entire oeuvre. Though, his experiments and concern for materiality is probably best demonstrated in his *Lighter* series in which the photographic paper and its surface become the subject of the work itself (Fig. 2). In this ongoing series Tillmans plays with the effect of light on photographic sensitive paper.³⁴ The works come into existence in the darkroom, without the use of a camera, negative or enlarger. Before exposing the paper to any source of light, Tillmans interrupts the glistening, smooth surface through folding and creasing the paper. By experimenting with the possibilities of photographic chemicals, with different gradations of light on photosensitive material, and through folding and creasing the image, Tillmans creates a unique and irreproducible, abstract chromogenic-print. The creases, dents

³³ Ault 2008, p. 19-20.

³⁴ This series, starting from 2005, consists of individual abstract works, which are exhibited with the collective title *Lighter*. Earlier abstract series were *Blushes*, *Freischwimmer* and *Silver*.

and wrinkles are causing an upward movement compared to the white and flat wooden surface to which the photographic paper is mounted. It creates spatiality and in some cases even a real relief. Every fold and crease is causing its own little shadow, giving the paper a variable colour gradation; with every change in lighting, the hues vary with it. From a closed surface, the paper evolved to an open structure, taking up space and lending the works a three-dimensional character. This spaciousness is strengthened through the fact that the entire work is encased in a plexiglas box that moves the work off the wall into the exhibition space. Instead of a flat piece of paper, *Lighter* takes on a sculptural dimension. Instead of being reproducible, the *Lighter* works are unique pieces. Not referring to any representation or narrative, the work's focus is now purely on formal and material aspects such as colour, light, form and space, paper and plexiglas. It therewith refers to itself as a(n) (photographic) object. This self-reflexivity will be addressed in more detail in the next chapter.

Another artist whose photographic work can be considered to have sculptural qualities is Canadian artist Jeff Wall. While Wall's large-scale works are primarily pictorial, his work is often said to evoke the feeling of *objecthood*, a term first coined by art-historian and critic Michael Fried in his iconic essay "Art & Objecthood" (1967). In this renowned essay on minimal art, Michael Fried argues that the minimalist artwork lacks a signifying capacity and does not go beyond its mere existence as an object. The artwork therewith depends too much on the experience of the viewer and is therefore considered to be 'theatrical'.³⁵ Later, in his book *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before* (2008) Fried employs the term objecthood with regard to photography in a less negative manner. Wall's tableaux photographs are pictorial, holding up a narrative within one frame and are specifically meant for the wall, like a painting.³⁶ However, they also perform a sense of objecthood since they foreground their presence as large-scale, solitary objects that engage in an active relationship with its spectator.

Wall's large-scale light-boxes are particularly relevant in relation to objecthood (Fig. 3). Where Tillmans' *Lighter* works emphasise objecthood by their lack of representation and loss of transparency, Wall's lightboxes stress objecthood through their material construction and presentational form. First of all, the images are 'boxed' instead of framed. This means they are encased in an aluminium framework that grant the images a certain depth and three-dimensional character. Hence Wall's voluminous lightboxes literally take up space. Elevated off the wall, one becomes more aware of the fact that such a work not only has an outside with a front (image), but also has an inside with a back that is lit from behind

³⁵ Fried 1998 [1967]

³⁶ Fried 2008, p. 14.

with fluorescent lights. Additionally, the spatial character of the works is enforced through the fact that the boxes radiate light into the exhibition space and onto the floor, therewith not only taking up space due to their volume but also by means of light. As a result, the viewer is kept at distance by the large size of a lightbox but also by means of directly facing the bright light. Viewers not only experience an image *of* material objects, they are likewise directed towards to the photograph's own status *as* a spatial and material object.³⁷

In writing about the sculptural qualities within Wall's work, art historian Briony Fer emphasizes this role of the viewer in its relation to sculpture. Fer questions the usual oppositions between photography and sculpture; she cites artist Robert Morris who argues that photography and sculpture in essence take up absolute opposite positions. That is to say, photography might be able to document sculpture in space, the resulting document is unable to take into account the essential spatial experiences of its viewers when they encounter Minimalist artworks, such as those of Mary Miss, Robert Irwin or Richard Serra.³⁸ However, Fer questions this usual opposition by pointing to the fact that Wall's light boxes are indeed a representational record of space but notes that they are occupying space as well. She argues that through this "excessive presence" of the object, Wall's works echo the viewer's temporal and spatial experiences that concern Minimalist sculpture.³⁹ This suggests that photography's objecthood thus not only has to do with its physical form and construction but with Edwards' and Hart's aforementioned concept of the 'embodied experience' of the viewer as well.

1.2.2 A Multi-Perspective Object

The examples of Tillmans and Wall manifest the transformation of a seemingly flat photographic image into an object that has volume and occupies space. However, neatly framed or boxed, their works still depend on the wall. Moreover, they continue to uphold a relatively fixed approach of a spectator. That is to say, their work can only be observed from one side – the front – and the artist determines the eye level. With regard to spatial photo-sculptures the viewer becomes significantly more dynamic. Photography's dependence on the wall is challenged by presentational forms that allow the photo-work to stand freely in the exhibition space, therewith further blurring the lines between photography and sculpture. In such works the viewer's spatial and bodily experiences likewise have an even more prominent role to play.

³⁷ Fer 1998, p. 238.

³⁸ Fer 1998, pp. 237-238.

³⁹ Fer 1998, p. 237.

The work of Dutch artist Anouk Kruithof offers further thoughts on this matter since many of her photographically based works move between photography, sculpture and installation. *Never ending pile of a past pile of 10.000 A4 posters*, 2011/2012 (Fig. 4) can be seen as one of Kruithof's early attempts to translate the flat surface of a photograph into a spatial object.⁴⁰ *Never ending pile of a past* shows a stack of old photographs. This is a representation of Kruithof's personal archive of chromogenic prints that she assembled since she started working as an artist. The archive formed the 'raw material' with which she created a whole series of works; thus this stack does not exist anymore. While this original stack might not be present any longer, Kruithof created a new pile by making 10.0000 free take-away colour copies of the photograph and stapling these upon each other. The in principle flat photocopy is now part of a three-dimensional object that stands freely in space. Since the nature of the photograph to depict might not be adjusted, we might still experience the work as photographic. However, the photograph certainly cannot be mistaken for a view through a window since the object is obviously a constructed entity, present as an object in the exhibition space.⁴¹

This presence also demands for a different role of the viewer. He or she not only determines the distance to the work, one is able to walk around and is encouraged to view the work from above. Moreover, the existence of *Never ending pile of a past* literally depends on its viewers since they are invited to grab and take away a free copy. Here, it is the viewer's participation that will cause the artwork to shatter and alter. Paradoxically the 'never ending pile' will eventually disappear, just like its original one did.

In more recent works like *Sweaty Sculpture (Spectrum)*, 2013 (Fig. 5) en *Façade*, 2014 (Fig. 1), Kruithof exploits the spatial possibilities of photography to a greater extent. Both works are a complex whole in which Kruithof utilizes different materials in order to provide the works with spaciousness.⁴² In this manner, Kruithof had pictures printed on self-adhesive photo stickers that she subsequently mounted onto styrofoam blocks. The photographs therewith adopt the volume of the blocks. Consequently, they ensure that the photographs can stand freely in space. In addition she printed photographic images on plexiglas plates that were placed vertically between the blocks. Besides photographic images we also see the use of 'foreign' materials such as plastic foil and bricks. It follows that the transparency of the photographic elements becomes less through the application of these additional materials.

⁴⁰ The work is part of a comprehensive group of works that was shown under the title *Fragmented Entity*. It consists of photographs, video and spatial installations, take away posters, collages, shredded photo prints and photographs.

⁴¹ Westgeest, 2009, p. 109.

⁴² The intrinsic significance of this materiality will be discussed further in chapter three. First, the relationship between image and object is explained here.

Through the complex composition of these objects they touch upon the multimodality that characterizes installation art. Therefore, an interesting point of reference to consider such work is *Ruimte voor Beleving* (Space for Experience) (2010), an unpublished PhD dissertation by art-historian Anja Novak. In this dissertation Novak discusses how the experience of installation art differs from a traditional image experience. With the latter she refers to a photograph that acts as single frozen image, a coherent unity that presents itself to the likewise static viewer. Novak states that contrary to this traditional image experience, the reception of an installation is not experienced at a glance. She argues that the installation is a complex whole of which the viewer gradually perceives coherence by linking the separate elements and details of the installation. Instead of the rather static viewer in a traditional image-experience, the reception of an installation is a process that is performed by a dynamic visitor and takes place both in space and in time.⁴³

In the case of Kruithof's sculptures, one could argue that the traditional image experience is combined with the (visual) experience of the installation as described by Novak. In the case of *Façade*, the viewer recognizes photographic imagery at a glance. However, the usual rather volatile and static image experience that would follow is complicated, as the artwork in its totality will not be taken in this manner. Where a photograph on the wall is unchangeable and has a static visitor, *Façade* and *Sweaty Sculpture* ask for an active viewer who does not relate oneself to the work in a fixed pattern. First of all, Kruithof breaks through what normally would be watching a rectangular image. The photo stickers are mounted onto the styrofoam blocks and they are bent around the corners of this material. The visitor necessarily needs to encounter the work from all sides in order to behold it in its entirety. One can squat to view the work sideways, or stand closely to have a look from above. Through the selected formation of objects, even then not all parts of the photograph are to behold.

In addition Kruithof deliberately plays with the presence of materials to enforce these dynamics even further. By printing on radiant plexiglas plates the visitor will not experience a static image; the partially transparent plates change colours according to the viewing angle and source of light, resulting in an innumerable variety of shades and colours. Furthermore, both the plexiglas plates as well as the shiny cellophane foil with which the photographs are wrapped with, reflect the surrounding space as well as the viewer when it passes through space. Herewith the work is seen differently from every angle and height, thus constantly changing what is to be seen. Consequently, instead of a primary visual experience, Kruithof's

⁴³ Novak 2010, pp. 81-82

photo-sculptures – equal to installation works – call upon multiple senses through which the bodily experience of the viewer is increased.⁴⁴ As a result, approaching, viewing and comprehending *Façade* seizes the time of the visitor.⁴⁵

There is another phenomenon that seems to have been inherited from installation art. Among others art critic Boris Groys argues that installations refer to their own presence in the here and now.⁴⁶ However, when they are brought in relation with photography this fact is disturbed. The ‘here and now’ is strikingly inconsistent with photography being theorised as precisely the medium that refers to ‘what has been’.⁴⁷ David Green, writing on photographic documentation of sculpture adds:

"If photography speaks to us of the past and of the absence of the object, then sculpture speaks to us of the present and of the presence of the object. What's interesting about these artists who bring together sculpture and photography is how these different constructions of space and time interact. The concept of a fictional present suggests that it may be possible to move photography beyond or outside of its seemingly exclusive attachment to a moment that has passed."⁴⁸

Green already observes a disruption of our conventional experiences in what is simply the documentation of sculpture by means of photography. But what happens to concepts of place and time when photographs are combined within spatial objects? In the book *Take Place: Photography and Place from Multiple Perspectives* (2009), this thinking is developed further. Helen Westgeest (editor) concludes that by the integration of photographs in spatial objects (such as assemblages or installation art) the concept of place in photography is changed. The notion of place here is not only experienced *in* photographs, which refer to a reality somewhere else in time. Visitors also experience the emphatically presence of the place *of* photographs.⁴⁹ In *Façade* the depicted men suits and the male figure refer to an external reality that took place in another time and place. At the same time, the above analysis of this work revealed that the object-status of the photograph is increased through combining it with other spatial materials. These photo-sculptures are not looked through but looked at. It follows that the photograph not only serves as something that refers to what happened in the

⁴⁴ Novak 2010, p. 93.

⁴⁵ Novak 2010, p. 82.

⁴⁶ Boris Groys, Retrieved from: <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/politics-of-installation/>

⁴⁷ Barthes 2000 (1981), p. 76.

⁴⁸ Green 1996, p. 268.

⁴⁹ Westgeest 2009, pp. 97-131.

past. In a photo-sculpture such as *Façade* the photograph is likewise, if not more, part of the present since these objects refer to their own existence in time and space, in the here and now. Where photography in traditional sense is a flat and discrete piece of paper, a (renewed) interest in photography's materiality can cause a tension within the artwork between I.: what it is representing, the image, and II. its surface, the object. This tension is made transparent by explicating in what ways photography is primarily a visual medium. By gradually making the transition from a more traditional flat photo to a spatial (multi-media) object it step by step revealed how this tension can heighten the relationship between image and object.

Tillmans, Wall and to a greater extent Kruithof, are artists who in fact try to break through the flatness of the image to emphasize the photograph as a constructed object. Through innovative presentational forms but also by means of surface interventions of the photographic print itself, the photograph's image, its surface and material composition can function as equally present and important aspects. The case-studies are all but flat images and do not merely depict but also take up space, therewith asking for different ways of viewing. While the first part of this chapter showed that in a conventional way of looking at photographs, we are inclined to a separate way of looking: image or object, one or the other. In the more spatial photographic works, image and object are viewed and experienced in one and the same action.

In addition, it seems that the more the surface and materiality of the work are present, the less transparent the image becomes. This emphasis on objecthood in these three-dimensional objects "take[s] hold of its beholders both to its association with the Real and on the grounds of its physical materiality."⁵⁰ By calling upon the viewers physical space, the participation of the viewer becomes an increasingly important – or at least more emphatically – element. It shows that in three-dimensional photographic works the bodily experience of the viewer becomes an even more prominent part of the artwork. The visual, the material and the spatial are brought closer together and are no longer to be considered as separate entities. A photo-sculpture, such as is the case in the work of Kruithof, can collapse image and surface, visual and material, flatness and spaciousness, inside and outside, movement and stasis, and 'that what has been' with the here and now. It causes a friction between photography's indexical, transparent and reproducible character and the present materiality of the object in question.

⁵⁰ Breitbach 2011, p.38.

2. Photo-sculptures in Today's Debate on Photography's Expanded Field

The previous chapter showed how artists are able to put emphasis on the experience of photography as image on the one hand and object on the other hand. Consequently, it introduced objects that balance on the boundaries of photography, sculpture and installation art. From a material expansion of the photograph that results in a shift from flat to spatial, this chapter maps the expansion of the photographic field itself. The first part of this chapter contextualizes three contemporary photo-sculptures by examining how these works position themselves within today's debate on photography as an expanded field. This is photography that no longer describes itself with one common denominator, which breaches its own borders and freely exchanges qualities and characteristics with other art forms.

The second part reflects on the larger context of the emergence and development of photo-sculptures. This part forms the background to explore what motives hide behind bringing forward the object qualities of the photographic medium, in which our post-digital era seems reason to return to material practices. Where photography used to be a medium of chemical and physical components, today, this seems overshadowed by alternate numeral codes that are immaterial.

2.1 Photography and the Expanding Field: Post, Over and Beyond?

The intermingling of photography with other media inevitably propels questions of what it is we are looking at; is this still photography? Similar questions became a general concern that in recent years took a central position within the theories of photography. Photography is everything and all around us, "residing everywhere, but nowhere in particular".⁵¹ So what then, is the value of continuing to speak of photography as a specific practice or discipline? This was one of the main questions addressed in a symposium held by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in 2010, provocatively titled *Is Photography Over?*. Answering the question was not the final goal of the event but rather handled the extension and transformation of our contemporary notion of the photographic.

In the recent past many photography theorists, historians and critics have expressed similar strong feelings of loss as reflected in the symposium's title, or at least their writing touched upon an apparently irreversible transformation of the medium that put the medium in

⁵¹ Batchen 2000, p. 109.

a state of crisis. “Post-photography”, “beyond photography”, “photography under construction”; these are just some terms many of them employ to describe the still current situation of the medium. Besides the convergence of photography with other media, the advent of digital photography was reason for many to express their anxiety that photography as a medium will soon collapse or perish. With the introduction of new digital techniques and increasing options for the manipulation of images, a line of demarcation arose amongst theorists. On the one hand, some believed digital photography would undermine photography’s veracity. They therewith insinuated the loss or death of the photographic medium.⁵² Opponents of such ideas argue that digital photography still relies on the conventions of, and behaves as analogue produced images, with the difference that the first come about by means of numeral codes and the latter by means of chemical processes.

Instead of stating that photography is ‘over’ or has not changed, photo-historian George Baker argues to regard photography as something that is expanded. Baker directly builds upon the ideas of Rosalind Krauss who, as outlined in the introduction of this thesis, in her article “Sculpture in the Expanded Field” (1979) in a similar manner attempted to map the illimitability of that what was called sculpture. Some twenty-five years after Krauss her influential article Baker wrote “Photography’s Expanded Field” (2005) in which he recognizes the resemblances between both expansions, such as the collapse of the categories or not being able to describe what can be understood by respectively ‘sculpture’ and ‘photography’.⁵³ However, the comparison does not hold up fully according to Baker. He notes that “the problem today is not that just about anything image-based can now be considered photographic, but rather that photography itself has been foreclosed, cashiered, abandoned - outmoded technologically and displaced aesthetically”.⁵⁴ Indeed photography can no longer be classified under one and the same header, nor can only one analysis be made on the basis of technological or formalistic features. However, Baker refuses to take on this attitude of ‘finality’ or ‘demise’ towards the medium.⁵⁵ Alternatively, he describes the duality photography is entangled in: on the one hand photography seems condemned to, in any form, mix with other practices, forms, techniques and materials and to use the characteristics of other art forms. On the other hand he remarks: “...whether fusion or disruption...something like a photographic effect still remains - *survives*, perhaps, in a new, altered form.”.⁵⁶ Baker lends Krauss her mapping diagram and therewith applies a structuralist analysis in order to

⁵² See for example William J. Mitchell’s ‘The Reconfigured Eye: Visual Truth in the Post-Photographic Era’, 1992.

⁵³ These movements are part of the larger post-medium condition in which disciplinary boundaries erode and in which artists engage with technical as well as formal aspects of different media together.

⁵⁴ Baker 2005, p. 122.

⁵⁵ Baker 2005, p. 123.

⁵⁶ Baker 2005, p. 123.

make visible in what ways photography is transformed (rather than that it no longer exists), how these transformations function and how they relate to each other as compared (Fig. 6.) In Baker's scheme photography is no longer positioned as the centre from which to start. He rather considers it as one term along the 'periphery' of an expanded field of photography.⁵⁷ Baker's model therewith resists a simple return to traditional modernist medium-specific practices and discourses within the interdisciplinary works that also occupy this expanded field.

Although we are already ten years ahead, Baker's conception of photography's expanded field seems to be still highly relevant today. For example, in 2012 the Southampton Solent University in England organized the symposium *Expanded Photographies: Technology, Perception, Representation*. Also in 2014 the Association of Art Historians held a symposium in the Royal College of Art in London in a similar fashion, entitled *Expanded Photography*. Central to this symposium was the question how we should understand the contemporary mixed practice of photography. The session's convenor was art historian and critic Lucy Soutter. In her book *Why Art Photography?* Soutter elaborates on Baker's expanded field of photography. When writing on photography that is combined with other art forms, Soutter agrees with Baker's general argument that there is a lot to gain from analysing such works in photographic terms.⁵⁸ However, Soutter states that "An expanded model of photography does not require this rigid rejection of all its historical properties. (...) [Many works demonstrate a] "productive relationship to the traditions of photography as a medium...".⁵⁹ She herewith pleads for a more inclusive model of expanded photography in which traditional (read: modernist) photography should not be rejected but *can* be considered all together within more experimental and extending modes of production. She therewith explores the possibilities of expanded photographic artworks having points of rupture on the one hand, but points of continuity on the other hand as well.⁶⁰ This idea is actually completely opposed to Baker's expanded field, since he is precisely against such a 'return' to a photography from which other expanded forms of photography arise. In that sense continuity could no longer exist.

Still, there is a case for Soutter's adaption of the expanded field of photography. Not in the least because the former part of this thesis has shown that the material and spatial experiments in contemporary art can exactly be traced back to more traditional and historical forms of photography. An example of this was the daguerreotype, which, as undisputable

⁵⁷ Baker 2005, p. 136.

⁵⁸ Soutter 2013, p. 112.

⁵⁹ Soutter 2013, p. 113.

⁶⁰ Soutter 2013, p. 114.

object, has material and tactile similarities compared to a more contemporary photographic object such as *Façade* or *Sweaty Sculpture* by Anouk Kruithof. Both are viewed and experienced in the direct physical space of the viewer.

Soutter's argument can even be made more apparent by exploring in what ways specific spatial photo-works demonstrate both points of rupture as well as points of continuity. That they demonstrate rupture became clear through chapter one, in which it was mainly explicated how the visual qualities compete with the emphasis on objecthood and spaciousness of a work, and how this likewise affects and changes the viewing behaviour of visitors. The greater the disruption the less photographic such work seemed to be. What then are their specific traditional photographic properties that can still be traced?

For example, take one work from Tillmans' *Lighter* series. On the one hand such work seems primarily an abstract colour and paper study. However one could also claim that such a work is completely *about* photography. By folding and creasing the image, photography's properties are at once disturbed but also emphasized. One is confronted with the originally rectangular form of photographs. At the same time, through manipulating the photograph's surface the viewer gains insight into the characteristic flatness of photographic paper. Additionally, the creasing causes floodlight to reflect in such manner that it puts more emphasis on the shininess of the glossy photographic paper, therewith again referring to the photograph's surface. In addition to these formal photographic qualities the image also functions in a photographic manner. On the one hand it seems that by the abstraction of the image the indexicality is fully lost: there is no longer a visible causal relationship with a referent. On the other hand one could argue that this work is in fact very indexical: the resulting image is a trace of the photographs own material form and its creation. Therewith *Lighter* can be considered to be self-reflexive with regard to its formal characteristics as well as its own production process. This referencing of and drawing attention to the own medium is what media theorists Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin call 'hypermediacy'.⁶¹

Hypermediacy within photography can also be achieved without the hypermedial aspect is necessarily to be found in the photographic print itself. Anouk Kruithof's *Façade* and *Sweaty Sculpture* are two good examples of that. Like Tillmans' *Lighter* works, the photographic parts in Kruithof's photo-sculptures seem haunted by the burden of photography's supposedly inherent flatness. Although the photographs are part of a complex combination of materials, forms and techniques, the photographic prints are also easily detectable as flat, individual photographic prints, floating against their support. Individually

⁶¹ Bolter & Grusin, 1999.

the photographs can be called transparent images. The photographs of a row of grey men suits, hanging on their garment hangers are printed at actual size, which, partly because of the volume of the styrofoam blocks, make it appear as if they really are present in space. On the other hand this transparent character is also disrupted. The images are sealed with cellophane foil allowing the photographic surface to be made opaque to some extent. Simultaneously the creases and wrinkles, which were caused through tightening the foil, make the viewer aware of the phenomenon of surface as it draws attention to the different material layers of which the object consists. Although the photographic elements in *Façade* are not to be called self-reflexive in itself, by making use of other materials they do perform a sense of hypermediacy. Westgeest & Van Gelder explain that “Multimediating pictures (...) generate reflection that precisely flows from their combining effort...”.⁶² For *Façade* this means that, while the differences in materials and techniques become more apparent, one could also argue that the photographic aspects are more clearly recognizable as such.⁶³

Whose work really seems to disrupt the photographic medium is the work of American artist Letha Wilson. Wilson’s coloured photographs of mountains, rocks and plants, form the basis for her work. However, through working and manipulating the surface, as she folds and moulds the paper and covers parts of it in concrete, the flat and light-weight photographic print is turned into a heavy and thick three-dimensional object. *Colorado Purple* (2012) (Fig. 7) is an example of such work and shows fragments of a barren mountain landscape, a ponderous stone mass. The title refers to the Pikes Peak Mountains of Colorado and the atmospheric perspective that can give the illusion that the mountains have a purple and violet glow. *Colorado Purple* consists of photographic paper that depicts this purple-looking mountain landscape. But part of the photographic print is covered with concrete. Moreover, some parts of the concrete are treated with a so-called *thermal transfer* print process. By making use of this printing process the emulsion of colour prints can be transferred directly onto the concrete. As a result of this the ink sinks in the concrete. Herewith the image and the concrete material become one unity. Through this technique the photographs are literally set in stone, therewith giving the photographs volume and weight.

By combining these three techniques Wilson creates a complex image and object. On the one hand it seems like there is no recognizable image any more, only demonstrating a play with colours and materials. However, although partly covered and therewith not

⁶² Van Gelder & Westgeest 2011, p. 53.

⁶³ Where Kruithof’s photo-sculptures *Façade* and *Sweaty Sculpture* seem pretty much alike in terms of approach and use of materials, it is interesting to see how *Sweaty Sculpture* performs less hypermediacy. Although the photographs of sweaty armpits are sharply focused, the close-up image, the cropping and the folding along the edges ensure the images can also be associated with more abstract colour patterns and less as immediately recognizable photographic traces of an object or an event.

presenting a transparent view on to a landscape, when looking carefully, the photographic parts of the artwork depict specific details that are recognizable pieces of what then can only be seen as parts of the Colorado mountains. Moreover, the initial non-representational concrete is transformed into a referential surface through the process of thermal transfer. Although the referential image is disrupted, the work continues to point towards the real and continues to build and depend on photography's indexical qualities. If it had not been photographic traces this could not have been established.

When encountering Kruithof's and Wilson's photo-sculptures work one would not directly categorize it under the umbrella of photography. We see objects rather than mere images. They display a motley combination of materials and techniques. They are not 'conventionally' framed but occupy space, therewith more explicitly balancing between photography and other (three-dimensional) disciplines such as sculpture and installation. Additionally, what follows is a changing relation to the viewer's body through the multi-perspective way of contemplating the work, changing the static spectatorship to a time and place-based one. Altogether, the outer appearance and the formalistic qualities seem to be exuberant and radical, if not most because Kruithof and Wilson literally 'attack' the representational parts with concrete and foil. In Bakker's view this expansion would clearly reveal either a rupture with traditional photography or a fusion with other (three-dimensional) disciplines such as sculpture and installation.

However, at the same time these works remain tributary to existing and traditional productive workings of photography.⁶⁴ Their radicality leads to an emphasis on the remaining photographic qualities, therewith also highlighting what is classic, conventional and traditional about the photographic. Although *Façade* and *Colorado Purple* seem to move away from conventions, they simultaneously remain tributary to the same conventions. It follows that though the exploration of the medium's boundaries *and* properties, through broadening and fusing, the works continue to build upon an existing practice that therewith should not be considered foreclosed, abandoned, or replaced. It is still valuable to analyse the works from a traditional photographic perspective.

⁶⁴ Soutter 2013, p. 113.

2.2 A Material Turn: from a pre-photographic action to a post-photographic action

The above examples of photo-sculptures in which photography's materiality and intrinsic functions are highlighted can be seen as symptomatic for a broader contemporary movement in which artists experiment with the materiality of their photographically based work. As noted in chapter one, the material turn in cultural studies had its impact on the study of imagery and photography. The engagements with the concepts of materiality and object likewise formed an intellectual base for the practical and creative domain of the artist.⁶⁵

The 1990s are characterized by a transformation in existing imagery practices that was caused by a digital revolution, mostly characterized by the digital as an alternative or replacement for the analogue. Today, more than twenty years later, the digital did not fully replace the analogue; both still exist side by side, and - as will be returned to later - also exist with each other in an intermingling and hybrid form.

Although it not fully replaced the analogue, the digital occupies a more prominent place in our daily lives. Text, image and sound have all been digitized and have become indispensable. We have created a world where things increasingly come about by numbers and codes, a movement that created an accompanying disappearance of former original material and tactile object-characteristics. However, time proved that our desire for physical objects remains, or can even prompt a countermovement referred to as a post-digital reaction in which technological progress is not seen as a consequential improvement of older technologies.⁶⁶ For example, this is evident in the re-collection of vinyl records that are likewise accompanied by special edition slipcovers. In graphic design this finds resonance in the revaluation of artisan printing techniques that foreground handcrafting together with the unpolished results that this yields. Another example are 'artists-books', books that are often self-published by the artist in small editions. In some cases they are handcrafted and bound by the artist, but foremost special attention is paid to the used paper and printing, making the artist book an exclusive object that, not uncommonly, become rare collectors items.

The same can be said to occur in the field of contemporary photography. Although making photography's materiality the explicit subject of an artwork is not new and seized upon by many since photography's early days, fuelled by digitization artists increasingly became conscious of the physical and material properties of photography.⁶⁷ Recently there seems to be a longing to submit the material and the physical to experiment and research,

⁶⁵ Edwards & Hart 2004, p. 4.

⁶⁶ Edwards & Hart 2004, p. 15.

⁶⁷ Cotton 2009, p.219.

resulting in an even more increasing revaluation of such practices. This belief also resonates in the article "Photography's New Materiality?" (2012), written by Harriet Riches, Sandra Plummer and Duncan Wooldridge, who articulate photography's recent exploration of materiality as "a contemporary trend".⁶⁸ Their belief is that transformations in digital technologies and its additional loss of photography's material presence can be seen as the catalyst for an increase in reflexive photography with a material focus.

Artists started to react on both the immateriality of digital photographs as well as to an omnipresence of imagery as a result of this digitalization. An outburst of events and exhibitions are symptomatic of this and all handle the subject in varying ways. The *British Journal of Photography* devoted its entire April issue of 2015 to this new material world. *Beyond the Frame: Photography & Experimentation*, a conference hosted by Tate Modern in 2014, explored in what ways photographers experiment with "the materiality of paper and analogue processes, to the role of light, colour, composition and space".⁶⁹ In a similar fashion, in New York gallery Hauser & Wirth, *Fixed Variable* (2014) presented a group of photographic artists who reflect upon the tension between the photograph as object and image, through questioning its apparent two-dimensionality and by distorting the representational picture. *Under Construction: New Positions in American Photography*, an exhibition hosted by the photography museum Foam in Amsterdam in 2014 displayed diverse approaches that stressed a tension between the immaterial (often digital) image and the eventual resulting physical object. An exhibition called *Picture/Thing*, on display in 2015 in the Ezra and Cecile Zilkha Gallery in Connecticut, specifically addressed the photograph as balancing between photography and sculpture, therewith questioning the flatness of the photograph and the materiality of the print.

The artists who participated in these exhibitions are part of a whole generation of artists who experiment with and critically investigate the intrinsic characteristics and limits of photography. Their working method is impossible to summarize at once.⁷⁰ Nonetheless, their different outings can be divided into two different ways. First there seems to be a retrieval of old photographic processes and analogue techniques. From experiments with 'lensless photography' by artists such as Walead Beshty and Mariah Robertson to recovering the collodion glass negative as seen in works of Gwenneth Boelens (Fig. 8, 9 & 10).⁷¹

⁶⁸ Plummer, Riches, & Wooldridge, 2012. 'Photography's New Materiality: An Introduction'. Retrieved from <http://eitherand.org/photographys-new-materiality/photographys-new-materiality/>.

⁶⁹ Retrieved from Tate.org.uk: <http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/talks-and-lectures/beyond-frame-photography-experimentation>

⁷⁰ Charlotte Cotton states that this generation of artists should not be considered a group but a 'critical mass'. Cotton 2013, p. 35.

⁷¹ Wiley 2011, pp. 84-89.

It seems easily to dismiss such a trend as retro. Instead of referring to the issue this way, Plummer, Riches and Wooldridge state that rather than a nostalgic turn for the handcrafted object, the current engagement with the photographic surface should be considered more as a reflective study of the medium of photography itself.⁷² Batchen correspondingly links contemporary experiments in photography to early photographic experiments such as those carried out by Talbot and Bayard. Batchen states that what they have in common is that, besides the visual content, the artists create "photographs that were first and foremost about photography."⁷³

From the other hand, opposite from this return to analogue processes, others have found comfort in the digital. That is to say, many photographers make use of digital techniques that do not exclude them from creating physical work that highlights photography's materiality and physicality. On the contrary, once printed it is hard to visibly discern whether the work has been established digitally or in analogue manner.⁷⁴ In many cases these works demonstrate a mixture of tactics creating not only hybrid and layered works in their material form but also in their technical 'construction'. An artist who is illustrative of such work is the Japanese photographer Daisuke Yokota (Fig. 11). First he takes digital images of landscapes after which he edits and manipulates them with post-processing software. He then re-photographs these images with analogue film and prints them in the darkroom. Afterwards he exposes the referential image to heat and chemical experiment. The result is particularly hybrid in the creation of the final image - playing with both the materiality and immateriality of analogue and digital techniques alike. Contrary to Yokota, Lucas Blalock and Kate Steciw notably highlight the use of the Photoshop toolkit in order to interrupt the referential qualities of photography. The end result is a physical photographic print. Steciw additionally challenges the viewer by disrupting the conventional rectangular picture through her experimental framing (Fig. 12).

While the digital at first sight causes for a disappearance of material it has also broadened the range and choice of options and techniques, allowing artists to equally draw attention to the material, the surface and object that is the photograph.⁷⁵ Works of artist Ethan Greenbaum are brought about via high-tech techniques. His photographic images are directly printed on vacuum formed plastic, echoing the material surface of what is depicted and simultaneously directing the viewer's attention directly to the surface of the print itself. In

⁷² Riches, Plummer, & Wooldridge 2012, p. 29.

⁷³ Batchen 2014, p. 55.

⁷⁴ That is apart from the fact that the choice for an analogue or digital print often derive from substantive considerations that deal with the content of the work..

⁷⁵ Knoblauch in Smyth 2015, p. 31

Kruithof's sculptures this mixture of digital techniques with a material outcome is retrievable in her use of modern inkjet printing techniques that allow her to print images on self-adhesive sticker sheets and plexiglas plates. Where digital and analogue photography are often historically separated, having two ontologies, these working processes show that the two worlds can also grow closer together.

The common ground between the diverse approaches of the mentioned artists is that they do not put the emphasis on the photograph as primarily a referential medium. Charlotte Cotton states that “Contemporary photography has become less about applying a pre-existing, fully functioning visual technology and [is] more concerned with active choices in every step of the process.”⁷⁶ This coincides with a seemingly new definition of what are called ‘studio-based photographers’. Instead of seeing the photographer’s studio as a place where professional photo shoots take place, Lucas Blalock and Jessica Eaton refer to their studios as laboratories.⁷⁷ The laboratory that the darkroom once was, now has competition of a new kind of photographic laboratory, one where special attention is paid to process and building; where artists construct, mould, melt, saw, cut, paste, fold, mount, frame, and in some cases destroy the photographic image. They therewith take the importance from the more classical taking of a photograph to a more experimental making of a photograph, in which their (new) working process often starts after the image itself is produced.⁷⁸

The spatial expansion within contemporary practice fits in this approach of using the photograph not as a final outcome of a concept or idea, but as a starting point to further submit them to thought and manipulation. In “Photography/Sculpture” photography curator Rebecca Morse makes a dichotomy within this crossover between photography and sculpture. On the one hand artists, like Sara Vanderbeek, use photography to build sculptures and assemblages only to transform them back into a two-dimensional document, destroying the construction afterwards. On the other hand, Morse points to the fact that photographs are used as materials to be integrated within three-dimensional objects, as is the case in the spatial objects that are the subject of this thesis.⁷⁹

Especially the latter marks a shift of importance and weight from the “pre-photographic action” to the “post-photographic action”.⁸⁰ For Kruithof the camera functions as a tool.⁸¹ She uses her photographic materials as building blocks with which she creates spatial installations and photographic sculptures. “I treat them [photographs] as my material.

⁷⁶ Cotton 2009, p. 219.

⁷⁷ Smyth 2012, p. 53.

⁷⁸ Batchen 2000, p. 109, Riches, Plummer, & Wooldridge 2012, p. 29.

⁷⁹ Morse 2010, p. 31.

⁸⁰ Van Gelder & Westgeest 2011, p. 202.

⁸¹ Kruithof in interview with the author, conducted on June 8, 2015.

It is often not the case that a photograph is the end result of my work.”⁸² She expresses that the development of a work such as *Façade* or *Sweaty Sculpture* is established in several phases whereby the outcome will not be determined in advance. She practically always starts her work from a theme or subject that forms the common thread through the entire process all together. The second step is photographing and documenting. Then a third phase arrives in which she gives her pictures physical form by printing them. So far it is not very different than how most photographs come into being. However, Kruithof adds a fourth translation to this work process in which she considers the physical photographs as a new starting point from which she can further reflect upon the form that she will give to her work. She folds, cuts, paste, cuts, hangs, and shuffles it just as long until she feels it is ready. The photographs, the selected material, the techniques and forms thereby almost always resonate the content of the image. With regard to *Façade* Kruithof not only literally creates multiple material layers, she also figuratively adds different layers of meaning. The work’s title reveals much of the work’s content. For Kruithof the dark grey suits depicted in the photographs refer to the corporate world of New York’s financial district.⁸³ The businessmen’s suits symbolise how they can act as a façade, since they create a certain formality and distance. Kruithof reinforces this idea by mounting the photographs of suits onto the styrofoam blocks, therewith literally erecting a blockade and façade that simultaneously echo the large office buildings of the financial district. Moreover, the monotone grey of the suits can be seen as rational against the colourful plexiglas plate that symbolises the emotion of the human being. Simultaneously the pressure to perform is symbolised by the bricks, as their weight puts pressure on the lightweight styrofoam blocks. Kruithof therewith reveals that form and content are closely linked; material is both determiner of the eventual form as well as determiner of meaning.⁸⁴ This meaning production is what is further discussed in chapter three.

Through positioning specific photo-sculptures in the contemporary debate about photography as an expanded field, it is revealed that Baker’s concept of an expanded field of photography of photography does not hold up fully. In his opinion the discussed works by Kruithof and Wilson would clearly illustrate a rupture with regard to traditional photographic characteristics on the one hand, as well as merge with spaciousness of sculpture or

⁸² Artist statement in interview with Joerg Colberg, retrieved from: http://jmcolberg.com/weblog/extended/archives/a_conversation_with_anouk_kruithof/

⁸³ As stated in Anouk Kruithof’s portfolio of works created between 2009 and 2014, retrieved from http://www.anoukkruithof.nl/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/anouk_portfolio_final_2.pdf

⁸⁴ Batchen 2014, p. 49.

installation on the other hand. Although the photo-sculptures by Kruithof and Wilson indeed radically shift away from characteristic elements such as transparency, the single perspective or reproducibility, at the same time they keep leaning on the indexicality that is so intrinsic to photography. It follows that expansion allows for both rupture *and* continuity. The same applies to the fact that digital innovation does not exclude to return to classic photographic qualities such as materiality, surface and objecthood. That progress is not necessarily a linear process will become more evident in the next chapter.

3. Breaking New Boundaries

In 2011 the Cherry & Martin Gallery in Los Angeles and later in 2014 the Hauser & Wirth Gallery in New York, revisited *Photography into Sculpture*, an exhibition that was originally hosted by the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1970. *Photography into Sculpture* was put together by MoMA's Curator of Photography Peter Bunnell and brought together a diverse group of artists who all worked with photography in combination with a wide variety of techniques and materials (Fig. 13). The outcome of their works had one factor in common: it were "photographically formed images used in a sculptural or fully dimensional manner".⁸⁵ Their unique ways of backing, mounting and framing images caused the work to balance on the borderline of being sculpture on the one hand and photography on the other hand. *The Photographic Object, 1970*, as the contemporary gallery version of the show was titled, brought together a selection of works from the original show and was complemented with additional works from the participating artists of the time (Fig. 14 & 15). Hosting *The Photographic Object, 1970* was not a random choice since the objects on display seem to mirror the current experiments with photography and sculpture. In several writings and reviews of this renewed version, critics have signalled this kinship. However, although the contexts of emergence are different, it seems that on the basis of formal similarities the assumption is (too) easily made that the current experiments are simply a continuation of an earlier crossover.⁸⁶

This chapter therefore investigates to what extent contemporary photo-sculptures can distinguish themselves from this previous similar-looking movement.⁸⁷ The first part of this chapter explores the historic exhibition to find out what drove the ideas of the artists involved. Subsequently, this will be juxtaposed to the current photographic context in which the photograph as three-dimensional object is able to occur. What are the similarities as well as differences? Were the motives behind making these works really different and what does that mean for how the works came into being and how they look? Was photography taken up as a means to an end or to change our way of experiencing photographs?

⁸⁵ MoMA's Press Release of *Photography into Sculpture*, April 8, 1970.

⁸⁶ See for instance Morse 2010, p. 31 and Wiley 2011 on <http://artforum.com/picks/id=29118&view=print>.

⁸⁷ With regard to this research, this chapter is limited to objects that were on show in the 1970 exhibition.

3.1 Photography into Sculpture: I & II

Although today's intermingling of photography with other media might have found a novel appearance in a way that the medium does not seem to have had before, a retrospective view sheds a refreshing light on this phenomenon. The outer appearance might 'feel and look' new, its concept is far from original. In the 1960s and 1970s in particular an explosive use of photography within the art world took place. Today's division of 'taking' and 'making' a photograph is inherited from these years in which this opposition was similarly visible. The black and white, high quality print, neatly framed and presented on the wall had to make way for the photographic object that emphasized the idea of the artwork. The photograph was exploited as an instrument and tool for documenting an event rather than that it was chosen for the then prevailing artistic qualities of the photographic medium. It created a 'gap' between the then prevailing modernist style of art photography and the experimental, less aesthetic approach in which photography was primarily considered 'a means to an end.'⁸⁸

Driven by these ideas and attitude of Conceptual artists, the painters, sculptors and photographers of the time showcased experiments in which they challenged and expanded the way in which a photograph could become a meaningful part of an artwork. Their ideas were reflected in a wide variety of forms and subjects, which often resulted in a hybrid convergence of two or more practices. Among others it lead into overpainted photographs, photographs mounted or printed on fabric and images that were cut, folded or pasted onto a second support. In a more nuanced way photography likewise played an important role in new forms of performance art of the time. Besides pure record-making, performance actions were orchestrated with the intention to photographically render the results of the event.⁸⁹ An interesting question resulted; what exactly forms the artwork, is it the performance, the photographic object that documented this performance, or both?

In a similar fashion, sculpture likewise transcended boundaries, resulting in what Rosalind Krauss termed sculpture's expanded field. From the one hand it broke away from the traditional idea of the sculptural object as a physical object of art. In foregrounding the idea of a time and space based sculpture, the photographic medium, as argued by art-critics Lucy Lippard and John Chandler, was often employed to (further) 'dematerialize' the sculptural object.⁹⁰ It resulted in an extensive recording of these 'sculptural' works.

⁸⁸ Fogle 2003 [1989], p. 10.

⁸⁹ Besides applying the medium for documenting the actions, Jeff Wall points to the work of Richard Long; for here it is not the action that was recorded but the result of that staged action of which the photographic rendering is what rests. Wall continues with the work of Bruce Nauman stating that by bringing the performative action into the studio of the artist, the photographic record making here fuses with performance, reportage and studio-photography all together. See Wall, p. 36.

⁹⁰ Lippard & Chandler 1968, p. 218.

Paradoxically, as argued by David Green, photography in fact re-materialized the sculptural object, but this time by its imprint in the photographic image.⁹¹

A different expansion of sculpture is seen in the exhibition *Photography into Sculpture* in MoMA. This expansion fits in the times' conceptual experiments to transgress the boundaries of media. Photo historian Mary Statzer writing on the exhibition, states that the image and surface of a photograph is indeed defied more often by drawing and painting upon the image's surface or by experimental printmaking. However, Statzer marks that it was a novelty to transgress photography's surface by rendering it in a three-dimensional way.⁹²

Although coming about in completely different timeframes, in considering both groups of works - the corpus discussed in this thesis and the works on show in the 1970 exhibition in MoMA - some remarkable similarities can be found. First of all they share their spatial qualities, resulting in multi-perspective objects. In the second place, artists then and now are constructing and handcrafting the photographic objects in question. The resulting objects have multiple layers of different materials that therewith result in unique photographic objects. Additionally their genesis can both be explicated in light of technical innovation. As explored in the previous chapter, today, due to the advanced digital nature of photography, photo sculptures can be seen as a form of returning to a material presence; a counter reaction on photography's disappearing physicality and the decrease of the photograph as a craft. Simultaneously the current available (digital) techniques facilitate artists with new opportunities that enrich their available tools, through which literally 'new' forms arise.

The photo-sculptures from the seventies are obviously not fuelled by digital techniques but the atmosphere of opening up frontiers between different media practices in a similar way allowed for a newly available toolbox, filled with materials and techniques that previously were not in the vicinity of the photographic medium. The sculptures in the exhibition show the use of different types of photographic images, ranging from high quality prints, to images retrieved from books, magazines or even transparent packaging materials. Photographic prints were frequently combined with or brought into contact with materials ranging from plastic, wood, cardboard, to glass and textile. In *Hill* (1970) from Robert Brown and James Pennuto (Fig. 16), a serigraph of a landscape is turned into a bulging three-dimensional object on the wall through the vacuum formed plastic in which the image is encapsulated. *BLT* (1965) by Robert Watts (Fig. 17) is a flat and lightweight photograph of bacon, lettuce and tomato, which acquires depth, weight and form by sandwiching it in thick transparent

⁹¹ Green 1996, p. 263.

⁹² Statzer, 2014. Retrieved from the Aperture Magazine blog: <http://www.aperture.org/blog/mary-statzer-photography-sculpture-new-york-1970/>

plexiglas, herewith literally giving it the form of a sandwich. Michael de Courcy pasted 100 cardboard boxes with silkscreen images of nature (Fig. 18). The birds, clouds, water, trees and plants depicted de Courcy's surroundings as he lived at the west coast of Canada. The boxes were stacked randomly at each exhibit. They all together mapped as it were, the different locations of his environment into a random cartography.

In the wall text of the exhibition, Bunnell states:

“Photography into Sculpture embraces concerns beyond those of the traditional print, or what may be termed ‘flat’ work, and in so doing seeks to engender a heightened realization that art in photography has to do with interpretation and craftsmanship rather than mere record making.”

Reading Bunnell’s words one could hardly imagine that he described works that now date 45 years back, as his words perfectly fit contemporary photographic sculptures. While the objects seem similar in their attempt to combine sculpture and photography into a new image/object convergence, the two bodies of work do come about in very different contexts and had different motors that instigate(d) the ideas behind them. In contextualizing *Photography into Sculpture* the works were described as exploiting “the properties unique to photography itself”.⁹³ While the works are therewith supposingly presented as challenging and repositioning how to experience photography, this lead role for the medium is particularly surprising.⁹⁴ Rather than drawing attention to what photography could be and do, the use of the photographic medium within conceptual art is most often explained as opening up new ways for exploring the possibilities and notions of other media such as painting, performance, or in this case sculpture. For instance, Geoffrey Batchen who signals resemblances between the MoMA exhibition and contemporary photo-sculptural artworks states that, “Artists made use of photography not as a fine art medium but as a means of deadpan documentation that also happened to be a convenient building material.”⁹⁵ Within this latter assumption the work of the 1970s might have propelled questions on the nature of photography as well, but this should not be considered as intentional. Furthermore it might also explain why practically no photo-theoretical articles have yet appeared on the 1970 three-dimensional photo-works. It therefore seems much more plausible to argue that

⁹³ Bunnell 1970, wall label for *Photography into Sculpture*.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Batchen 2000, p. 110.

bringing together the two media forms was mainly stemmed from the urge to further expand that what was considered sculpture.

Although the exhibition was organised by the MoMA's curator of photography, in closer analysing the works that were on display in MoMA one can find signs that point out that it was mostly the expanding category of sculpture that lead the way. Photography then, was indeed a convenient building material, proving Batchen he was right in his argument. Note that there are exceptions such as the works from Robert Heinecken that disturb the coherence of one photograph by dividing it in separate pieces (Fig. 19).⁹⁶ To begin with, the works on display were remarkably small and primarily still black and white images while colour photography was already available. If one wanted to challenge and question the conventions of art photography of the time why not use disturbing sizes or prioritize the use of colour instead of black and white? Additionally, the effect of the images was not really 'changed' by their transformation into sculptures. That is to say, the representational and indexical workings that belong to the idea of photographic documentation were maintained as we continue to see portraits, bodies, landscapes, birds and food. In some cases they might have been elevated from their original context of magazines, books and packings, or combined with other images, but the image itself kept functioning in traditional ways. This usage of photographic imagery in fact only confirms the spirit of the age in which "the information, and not the thing, is valuable", and in which "photographs are silent flyers that [can be] distributed by means of reproduction."⁹⁷ Their material condition is therewith of minor importance for the meaning of the artworks. Thus we can see that by consciously abstaining from using tactics that could have questioned photography's depictive qualities and its veracity, the majority of the artists seem to cling on tradition(s) nevertheless. Instead of providing new ways of perceiving photography the photographic material added an informative visual reality to the sculptural objects.

3.2 Beyond the Burden of Depiction

It is this questioning of photography's characteristics what distinguishes the majority of the 1970 works of *Photography into Sculpture* and the contemporary works that are the subject of this thesis. In posing questions on the nature of photography many contemporary

⁹⁶ I mention him separately because of the fact that he deliberately breaks with direct intrinsic qualities of photography. By cutting the visual elements in separate small pieces, as seen in his *Figure Cube* (1965) and *Multiple Solution Puzzle* (1965), Heinecken puts pressure on the indexicality and transparency of the image. Instead of a 'coherent whole', a 'picture', or a 'window', the viewer is challenged to unravel what one is looking at exactly.

⁹⁷ Flusser 2000 [1983], p. 50.

photographic works go beyond only putting tension on the photo as both image and object. For example, George Baker compares Conceptual artists with contemporary photographic artists and state that the latter are “less utilizing photography to recode other practices than allowing the photograph to be recoded in turn.”⁹⁸ Harriet Riches, Sandra Plummer and Duncan Wooldrigde, who write on a material turn in contemporary photography, make a similar distinction, stating that “...what distinguishes contemporary self-referential photography from previous reflexive practices is that its exploration of medium occurs by transcending the characteristics of the photographic.”⁹⁹ Instead of meshing photography into sculpture, today sculptural qualities are imbued into photography, therewith changing the photographic medium rather than the sculptural medium.

When comparing Letha Wilson’s *Colorado Purple* (Fig. 7) and Robert Watts *BLT* (Fig. 17) for example these distinctions become more apparent. While both are presented as spatial objects with a photographic character, *BLT* is not necessarily exploiting photography’s unique properties. The used image clearly is a recognizable photograph of bacon, lettuce and tomatoes. It is mainly photography’s documenting character that is put to use here. *Colorado Purple* perhaps remains leaning on a similar indexicality as well but this indexicality is disturbed by layers of concrete at the same time. In contrast to *BLT* photography here, does not immediately serve as an informative and representational record. Conversely, Wilson composed a form of representation that in fact does not exist in reality. She therewith questions and reflects on the effectiveness of photography’s documentation.

What is at play is what John Tagg formulated as “The Burden of Representation”.¹⁰⁰ That is to say, no matter how small or abstract an image might be, photography is haunted by its escapable depiction, or at least by the confidence that it depicts something. What is at stake in many contemporary photo-sculptures is that this burden or limit is put to play in order to at once show that it is photography’s limit or flaw and paradoxically that it does not restrain artists to at least *think* beyond this burden at the same time.

Whereas in *Photography into Sculpture* photographs were mainly used as visual or narrative additions in the sculptures, it seems that in the present it is the other way around. Today, ready-made objects and materials are added and combined with photographs in order to reveal how photography’s depictive and indexical qualities in their singularity are insufficient to tell a complete story or reality. Objects, materials and techniques might at once attack the visual qualities and narrative possibilities of photography but can also strengthen

⁹⁸ Baker 2005, p. 122-123.

⁹⁹ Riches, Plummer, Wooldrigde 2011, p. 30.

¹⁰⁰ Tagg 1993.

them. In his essay “Ere the Substance Fade: Photography and Hair Jewellery” Geoffrey Batchen demonstrates how the application of other materials onto the photographic surface can extend the indexical trace of the photograph.¹⁰¹ It can thus also extend the understanding and effectiveness of the photograph. The latter is only visible when the selected materials are further analysed for their more metaphorical meanings.

In *Sweaty Sculpture* (Fig. 5) by Anouk Kruithof and *Colorado Purple* (Fig. 7) by Letha Wilson this particular strengthening of indexicality through the use of additive materials is clearly reflected. In *Sweaty Sculpture* the images of sweat stains are a symbol of physical and psychological stress and embarrassment. The photographs of sweat-stained shirts were the starting point to continue to work beyond the image and to look for materials that convey a similar thought as what is depicted in the photographs. For instance, the styrofoam blocks on which the photographs were mounted are not random supports but are chosen because of their literal insulating function that provides warmth.¹⁰² At the same time this material symbolizes an absorbing effect. Also the sponges precisely absorb moisture. The styrofoam blocks are then sealed with transparent foil, partly making the photographic surface opaque. In this way the material, both literally and figuratively speaking, locks up the photographs, through which air and moisture regulation is obstructed in a more symbolic way as well. In addition, by placing the plexiglas plate between the two blocks Kruithof literally gives it a cramped position. This analysis shows that the used materials and techniques are incorporated as an important part of the concept and content of the work. In *Sweaty Sculpture* the idea of transpire is not only translated into a picture, but gets an extra metaphorical and poetic content layer through the chosen materials, but also by treating the photos themselves in a literal suffocating way. The artist herewith stretches and expands the photographic language; the indexical is supplemented by the imaginary and the symbolic. Instead of seeing sweat as primarily something as a sign of stress and as something that is embarrassing, Kruithof transforms sweat into a colourful, playful and aesthetic experience. Moreover, where sweat is normally something that one would hide, the viewer here is encouraged to scrutinize the appearance and internal meanings of sweat.

Wilson seems to choose her materials with similar aims. The choice for the use of concrete in much of her work not only gives weight, depth and dimension to the seemingly flat photograph, but also likewise strengthens the depicted subject substantively. While in *Colorado Purple* a high level of narrativity is lost through the application of concrete, it also gained a new form of communicability. In writing about the overpainted photographs of

¹⁰¹ Batchen 2004, p. 32-47.

¹⁰² Kruithof in interview with the author, conducted on June 8, 2015.

Gerhard Richter, Van Gelder en Westgeest quote the artist who states that his overpainted photographs display an interplay between “two realities”.¹⁰³ This is exactly what is at work in Wilson’s photo-sculpture. By submitting the photographs of mountain landscapes with concrete, Wilson not only translates the physical and tactile properties of the photographed landscape in an image, she also takes the physical materiality into the reality. With these interventions Wilson would attempt “to compensate for the photograph’s failure to encompass the physical site it represents”.¹⁰⁴ On the one hand the shiny pieces of paper depict the mountains in Colorado. On the other hand, the matt patches of concrete bring the vagaries and hardness of the same mountains to the here and now. Therewith that what is depicted becomes a haptic experience - one that photography alone is insufficient for.¹⁰⁵

To conclude this material analysis, Kruithof’s and Wilson’s photo-sculptures function as separate, stand-alone objects, unfolding a more complex internal meaning within the totality of the object itself. In these works photography in its most single form suddenly no longer seems the most sufficient form to translate and represent a reality. That is not to say that Kruithof and Wilson question photography’s seemingly truthful and real character; we all know by now that photography is as much truth as it is fiction. In their attempts to subvert this idea of one truth, they almost allude to John Szarkowski’s formalism that resisted narrative and foregrounded fragmentation and symbol. While subject matter is an important part of both *Sweaty Sculpture* and *Colorado Purple*, the works centralise a decoding of productive workings of photographic imagery in one and the same action. From its rectangular frame towards the power of the index, Wilson and Kruithof are breaking through the dominance of depiction, at the same time embracing photography’s nature and highlighting its limits and flaws.

Finally, the complexity of multiple layers, not only with regard to materiality but also with regard to conceptuality, brings us to issues of perception on the side of the spectator. These works are layered not only from a technical or material standpoint. Also from a substantive point of view these are complex works that did not come into being by a simple click on the button, but it is followed by a process of thinking and above all making, forming and moulding. While in the 20th century photography was considered one of the most democratic art forms, today with almost every person having a small pocket camera and cameras on their phones, photography can be considered to have become even more

¹⁰³ Van Gelder & Westgeest 2011, p. 53.

¹⁰⁴ Press Release Letha Wilson, Solo Show, 2014. Galerie Christophe Gaillard, Paris.

¹⁰⁵ Paradoxically, where the conceptual 1960s and 1970s might be characterized by Lippard’s and Chandler’s idea of dematerialization, the conceptual approach of Kruithof and Wilson is only to be interpreted by close analysis of the materials used.

democratic.¹⁰⁶ The sculptural photographic works in this thesis seem to be a counterpart of this. The viewer has to make more effort to read the work, rather than to simply ‘consume’ it.¹⁰⁷ Besides the multi-perspectivity that asks for multiple ways of seeing, the material composition of the works asks for different ways of reading, therewith creating a more complex visual literacy.

By comparing the historic exhibition *Photography into Sculpture* with the contemporary crossover between photography and sculpture, as seen in the case-studies of this thesis, it became transparent that besides many similarities between the two also important differences are to be discovered. For example, it became clear that the differences in the driving force caused for different meaning production of the works. The works from the '70s fit in the, for then, prevailing tendency to go beyond the boundaries of media-categories. Photography was often taken as the medium to make this possible. In this light, that what was considered to be sculpture was stretched to an expanded form as well. In the contemporary works this expanded form of sculpture is also reflected. However, on the basis of careful material analyses it can now be stated that this is not an attempt to elevate the photographic image to the position or rank of sculpture or installation. The point here is that the sculptural qualities, such as referring to the here and now, its multi-perspectivity and the possibilities for the use of diverse materials, can now be used and applied in order to re-activate the thinking and reading over and on photography.¹⁰⁸ The artists at work simultaneously benefit from previous generations of artists who have cleared the way for them. That is to say that they feel the freedom to go beyond media categories and to work with characteristics of both photography and sculpture, resulting in a photo-sculpture. The result is a hybrid object that carries both photographic as well as sculptural qualities. However, by challenging the characteristics of photography and by even going beyond its borders, the artworks explored seem to demonstrate a deconstruction of photography's burden of depiction and representation. In the selected case-studies photography does not serve as merely a depictive medium, as a medium that points the finger towards a reality that was there at some point. These photo-sculptures ask their viewers to do the pinpointing.

¹⁰⁶ Soutter 2013, p. 96.

¹⁰⁷ Soutter 2013, p. 96.

¹⁰⁸ I borrow this thought from Jean-Francois Chevrier who makes the same kind of comparison with painting and photography. Chevrier 2003 [1989], p. 116.

Conclusion

When looking at a recent photographic work such as *Façade* by Anouk Kruithof, one would not immediately label it under the category of ‘photography’. It is as much a photograph as it is a three-dimensional object with a hybrid material composition that is situated in space as an autonomous entity. However, given the emergence of more and more of this kind of work, that carries photographic characteristics but also expands in spatiality and materiality, the question to what extent such work still leans on photographic aspects such as representation, indexicality and transparency, deserved attention. Conversely it felt important and relevant to indicate which aspects of such works precisely relate to more spatial disciplines such as sculpture or installation art. By exploring both the similarities and differences this research is an attempt to contribute to a better understanding of such photographic sculptures.

Photography is primarily seen as a medium of representation. Although photography has object qualities of itself, this seemingly insignificant physical and material side of photography is often overlooked. On the basis of chapter one, this physical side of photography is brought forward. It was made clear in what different ways photography, next to being a medium of representation, could also be considered as a material object. The case studies discussed in this chapter were chosen for their complementary characteristics. This approach resulted in multiple ways of perceiving photographs as (spatial) objects; objecthood can be emphasised by an abstract representation, by the sheer size or volume of the artwork in question, or by the relation to its spectator – which becomes more prominent when the object is to behold from multiple perspectives. This multi-perspectivity is what characterizes Kruithof’s *Façade*. On the basis of theories on installation art it was made clear that instead of a primary visual experience, Kruithof’s photo-sculpture – equal to installation works – call upon the viewer’s time and bodily presence in space. On the other hand the material composition that lends *Façade* its spatiality simultaneously disqualifies other intrinsic qualities of photography. Particularly, the complex material composition causes for a complete disqualification of qualities such as transparency and reproducibility.

Chapter one primarily revealed how spatial photographic works are able to transgress photographic boundaries by emphasising the photographic surface, objecthood, and spatiality. In addition to this, the second chapter positioned the works in the debate on photography as an expanded field. By investigating in what ways Kruithof’s and Wilson’s photo-sculptures expand, it was likewise revealed that the works remained tributary to certain intrinsic photographic characteristics. Although elements like depiction, representation and

indexicality seem to be attacked in the work of Anouk Kruithof or Letha Wilson, the work's internal meaning rests on these same elements. Thus, the expanding practice as seen in *Façade*, *Sweaty Sculpture* and *Colorado Purple* can be considered as both an exploration of the medium's boundaries as well as exploration of its properties, making such works partly self-reflexive. It follows that photography's ever expanding field can thus be seen as partly investigating and breaking apart boundaries, but also bringing to the fore what remain classical photographic qualities.

Chapter three reinforced these insights on the basis of a comparison between Kruithof's and Wilson's photo-sculptures and a, at first sight, similar looking group of conceptual works from the 1970s. As a result of this comparison, it became clear that contemporary photo-sculptures uncover, investigate and challenge photographic depiction and representation by making use of sculptural qualities. The materials used to create this spatiality reinforce and resonate the content of the image. The expressiveness of materials combined with the image content ensures that *Façade*, *Sweaty Sculpture* and *Colorado Purple* move beyond photography's primary aim; that is the dominance of depiction. It results in a particular paradoxical work: both image and object, flat and spatial, static and dynamic, transparent and opaque, conceptual and material, coherent and fragmented, and both reproducible and unique.

Epilogue

In this thesis I have attempted to investigate the consequences and implications that are embedded in a photo-sculpture's shift from two-dimensions to three-dimensions by their material composition. However, there is at least one aspect that has not yet been addressed but that was the motivation to start this research in the first place. It concerns what Elizabeth Edwards and Janice Hart called "the physical traces of usage and time".¹⁰⁹

As mentioned in the introduction of this thesis, in 2014 I was involved as a research intern in the research project "Photographs & Preservation: How to Save Photographic Works of Art for the Future?", a research project that focuses on conservation issues of post-1960 photographic artworks. Overpainted photographs, photographs mounted or printed on fabric, images that are cut, folded or pasted onto a second support: these are typical features of photography from the 1960s and 1970s, in which artists turned away from the perfect printed image. Driven by the ideas and attitude of Conceptual artists, painters, sculptors and photographers showcased experiments in which they challenged and expanded the modernist principle of what a photograph should be. By borrowing and blending ideas from various disciplines and media and combining them in a new work, they went beyond the traditional photographic print. Photography was liberated from its classic black and white style and was given a new appearance. The created photo-works often became unique artworks through the artist's material interventions. While pushing and pulling the boundaries of the medium, worrying about the importance of future display and conservation was probably one of the artist's least concerns. Now, almost fifty years later, it has become the subject of worry for the conservators and curators of today.

The photo-sculptures in this thesis likewise illustrate a complex physical composition and often consist of uncommon materials and techniques that create vulnerable photographic objects. Although these works are not part of the research project it is my opinion that artists such as Anouk Kruithof or Letha Wilson are an interesting addition to the project. Where in the conceptual art of the 1960s and 1970s artists were throwing overboard the conventional idea about photography through disparaging skill and authorship, Kruithof and Wilson are examples of artists who transcend the classic thinking about photography in a contemporary way by their experimental use of additional materials and uncommon techniques that provide their photographic works a three-dimensional character. This material turn in contemporary

¹⁰⁹ Edwards & Hart 2004, p. 3.

photography is creating (new) inherent issues and problems, affecting the artworks possible lifespan and posing conservators for new problems.

Many works that are included in the inventory of the “Photographs & Preservation” research have already deteriorated irreversibly. The photographic objects on show in MoMA’s *Photography into Sculpture* happened the same. For example, a review on the revisited exhibition in the *New York Times* discussed that “many works look dated, thanks to plastics that have not aged well”.¹¹⁰ What to think of a work such as *Colorado Purple* from Letha Wilson? Without doubt, the use of concrete cannot do much good for the sustainability of the photographic print. Do we even need to consider this or is this deterioration the intention of the artist and should we see the use of concrete as a metaphor for the erosion that her subject itself, the mountain landscape, has undergone through time? The same goes for the use of cellophane foil in *Sweaty Sculpture* and *Façade* by Anouk Kruithof. Covering the photographs not only resonates the content of the image but also literally creates a micro climate in which air and moisture can no longer be regulated. One could argue that this is also part of the work.

While for artists it might (not always) feel necessary to make distinctions between disciplines and media categories, this institutional framing of artworks in categories is not without reason. For the preservation of a valuable art collection it is valuable and vital. It is valuable not only in terms of economic value but also with regard to the arthistorical value that works carry with them. Whether it deterioration is the intention of the art work or not, the research into abovementioned photo-sculptures put things back in focus. While Wilson used one of the most durable materials one can find, its use simultaneously ensures the artwork to become temporary.

¹¹⁰ Rosenberg 2014, retrieved from http://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/18/arts/design/the-photographic-object-1970-revisits-a-renowned-show.html?_r=0

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Retrieved from: <http://www.anoukkruithof.nl/work/every-thing-is-wave-2/>

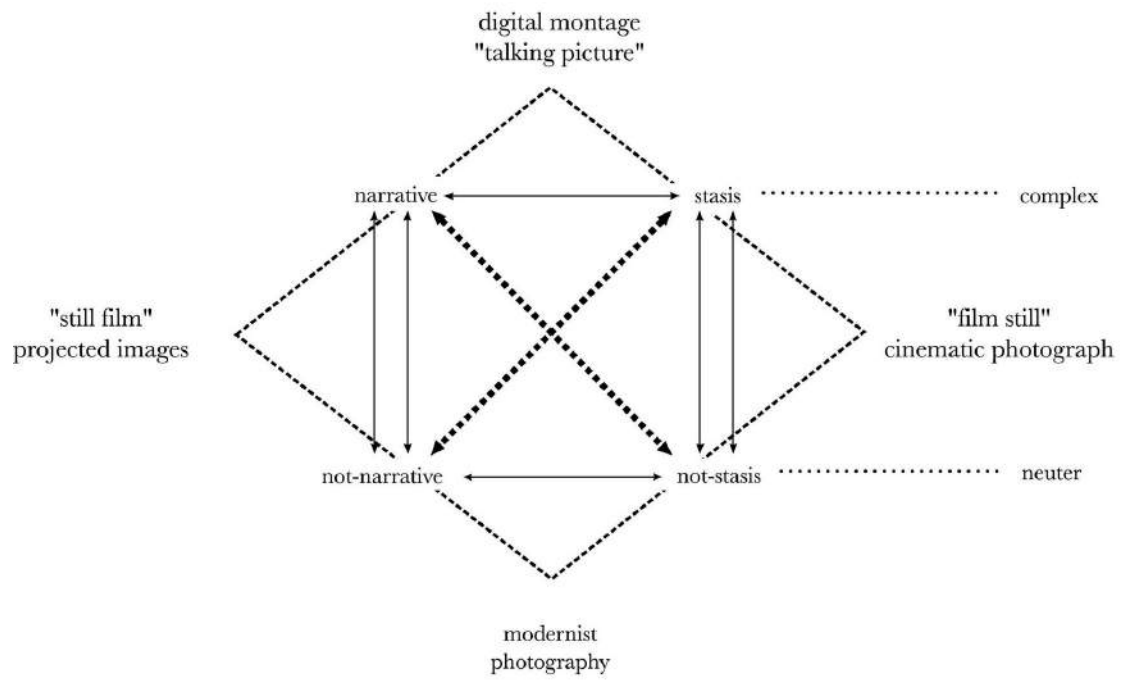


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