



Introduction

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Take Place

If it is easy to find theoretical publications about issues of time in photography, it proves quite hard to find any about concepts of place in photography. More than any other medium, a photograph tends to evoke questions on where it was taken and whether the world depicted involves a “real” or constructed place. But what, in fact, is the difference between the experience of a place in real life and in a photograph? And in which ways do a photograph’s context and the characteristics of the medium influence our experience of place in a photo?

Where to start finding answers to these questions? In theoretical reflections on the concept of time in photography it is common to draw comparisons between photography and the medium of film, or to borrow concepts and theoretical views from film studies. But where to go when the focus is on the concept of place in photography? In the autumn of 2006, these concerns and observations gave rise to a research project about concepts of place in photography, whereby priority was given to disciplines in which theorizing concepts of place is core-business. In the field of visual arts we may think of studies in sculpture, especially spatial projects in post-minimalist art of the 1970s, and, more recently, installation art, which is a spatial multimedia art form that may also be entered by the observer. Within the discipline of art history, architectural theorists have the most established tradition of investigating concepts of place and space. In scholarly research outside the arts, especially human geog-





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raphers deal with theories of place and space. Conversations with scholars in these various fields and with artists who research the relationship between place in photographs and surrounding places and spaces in part motivated the organization of a symposium in December 2006, at Leiden University, in the Netherlands. After a fruitful exchange of ideas and discussion, the participating scholars elaborated their presentations and wrote the essays which culminated in this volume, to which also the participating artists have contributed a selection of their work. The present volume can be considered as the first, important breeding ground for the development of theories of place in photography, quite similar to how studies in literature and painting have functioned to gain more insight into issues of representation and narrativity in photography, while studies of cinema have contributed to a better understanding of concepts of time in photography.

Aside from drawing on disciplines in which the theorizing of concepts of place plays a prominent role, several authors have selected either photographs which border on other media or specific multimedia artworks which include photographs aiming to investigate how issues of place in photography are influenced through their interaction with other media. Since the importance of the contextual study of photographs goes undisputed in debates concerning theories of photography, scholars have studied photography in a wide range of contexts, including





culture, specific institutions, a photographer's oeuvre, or as it is applied in documentaries, newspapers, books and so forth. To this day, however, almost no attention has been paid to photography in the context of multimedia artworks. In publications regarding theories of photography, the characteristics of the medium are quite often compared with those of other media, especially painting and film, but these comparisons focus on mono-disciplinary objects that are juxtaposed only theoretically. As a result, it remains unclear if and how the characteristics of photography (with regard to transparency, representation, indication of place and time, etc.) are weakened, strengthened, or changed in the juxtaposition to or interaction with other visual media. This is one of the gaps this volume aspires to fill.

One of the most important arguments for concentrating on spatial multimedia installation art as context of photography is the interesting discrepancy between the commonly mentioned characteristic of places in photographs and theories of place in installation art. Photography tends to be characterized as a medium that refers to places elsewhere or to places in the past. By contrast, much installation art is defined as a medium of the here and now. What happens when both media are juxtaposed or combined in a work of art is shown by the work of the American artist Gordon Matta-Clark. In some of Matta-Clark's works, photography is part of his spatial installations, or his installations are transformed into photographic





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collages, or photographs are transformed into objects. Moreover, his work addresses experiences of place in architecture, photography, installation art, and performances. Thomas Crow, former director of the Getty Research Institute at the Getty Center in Los Angeles and at present professor of art history at New York University, has made an in-depth study of the work of Matta-Clark. His essay for this volume provides valuable insights into various aspects of the work of Matta-Clark which deal with concepts of place and photography in multimedia artworks. At the beginning of his career, Matta-Clark treated photographic print as a material to be physically manipulated like any other material he worked with in his practice as a sculptor. The photo-collages he later made in order to convey the fractured spaces of his cuts into existing buildings are evidence of this same approach. His interventions in buildings and his photo-collages, which he sometimes exhibited together with fragments of these buildings, both arose from a specific concern for place in his own life history, yet they also generated forms entirely unrelated to any specific locale.

In a way quite similar to how Crow deals with Matta-Clark's photographic work, Hilde Van Gelder, professor of contemporary art history at the University of Leuven and specialist in theory of photography, discusses concepts of place in photography in relation to developments in sculpture since the late 1960s. Her essay shows that photography appears to be the privileged tool for researching dynamic and haptic ideas





about issues of spatiality and placement of objects in space. Van Gelder's case study dwells on the photographic work in multimedia experiments from the 1970s by the Belgian artist Philippe Van Snick. His work strongly focuses on the capacity of the photographic image to lay bare the instability of matter and place. According to Van Gelder it is often overlooked that photography frequently discusses themes such as dislocation, displacement, and the arbitrariness of apparently closed systems.

Whereas Crow and Van Gelder relate the concept of place in photography to spatial performances, interventions, situations, as well as installations, my own contribution to this volume addresses photography as presented in combination with spatial objects, or as integrated in assemblages or installation art. The context of these spatial media appears to change the experience of place *in* and *of* photographs. As a result of its chameleonic character, photography proves to be able to present places either as static and physical or as dynamic and immaterial. These variable and multilayered concepts of place implied by the photographs studied in a multimedial context, demonstrate the opposite of the well-known theory of the analogue photograph as only a trace of existing places: the intriguing places in these analogue photographs never existed in the real world. Instead, the photographs themselves create new meaningful places, of which we can only find traces in the real world. Moreover my investigation demonstrates the particular useful-





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ness of concepts of place from philosophy and human geography for theories of place in photography.

Because installation art is the form of art which is the most devoted to place, Anja Novak was asked to reflect on issues of place in installation art. Her PhD research in the Department of Art History at Leiden University concerns the particular spectatorship brought about by installation art. Among the key concepts of her research are intermediality and performativity. Novak focuses in her essay on site specificity, which is usually considered as a characteristic feature of installation art. Yet many installations do not refer to their actual settings (or do not only refer to them). There may be a tension between this actual space and the place a work refers to, or there may be no connection between them at all. This uncertainty of the relation between “place” and “space” is one of the points where installation art directly calls upon the viewer: the viewer’s experience becomes the “site” where a connection between space and place is consolidated or shattered. How this might happen, Novak demonstrates through a case-study of a particular installation by the American artist Paul Thek.

If Novak’s case study of Thek’s spatial construction and my case study of the architectural scale models by Constant both touch on theories of architecture, these theories serve as basis of Caroline van Eck’s essay. From a complementary interdisciplinary perspective, Van Eck, professor of the history and theory of architecture at Leiden University, focuses





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on the poetics of architectural representation in the West. This form of representation favors abstraction and disfiguration, drawing on anatomical techniques such as sectional or exploded views to represent buildings. Van Eck takes up Crow's subject of research and demonstrates that Gordon Matta-Clark's work uses these techniques, albeit to very different purposes: his representations of buildings do not offer "objective," quantified information, but show disuse, dereliction, and ruin. They suggest an architectural version of the uncanny. In spite of the architectural roots of its German equivalent *das Unheimliche*, the uncanny is usually associated with the representation of some living being that is not actually there, such as a reflection in a mirror when there is no living being present to be reflected. But is there a specifically architectural version of the uncanny? Van Eck discusses this issue on the basis of early modern architectural representations' use of anatomical techniques and the close association in the first architectural photographs of fundamental social change, ruins, and defiguration.

The essay by human geographer Barbara Hooper, former senior research fellow in the Department of Human Geography at Radboud University in Nijmegen and since 2007 affiliated with New York University, adds a valuable perspective to the *Take Place* debate, while her interest in modern art also allowed her to link up theories of human geography with modern art. Hooper's essay is in several ways related to Van Eck's contribution. But whereas Van Eck compares the experience of place





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in representations of architecture with Matta-Clark's interventions with respect to buildings, Hooper connects these interventions to her argument that we should consider (empty) space as matter as well, while she also demonstrates the consequences of her point of view. Following the "spatial turn" in critical social theory, many analysts in geography and other disciplines have argued that the inclusion of space is of primary significance for any social analysis. The recurrent message has been rather unambiguous: "space matters." In her contribution Hooper looks more closely at this claim: space matters, but is it matter or space? Her starting point is Edward Soja's call for a radical restructuring of Western ontologies in which space assumes, with being and time, a central position. The goal of the essay is to discuss Soja's restructuring efforts by interrogating his undeveloped assertions that time and space represent the objective form of matter and that time, space, and matter are inextricably connected. Hooper suggests, first, that what is named space is matter that has been spaced/timed into being; and, second, that if this is recognized, a very different idea not only of space but also of being and being-in-the-world would emerge. An alternative matter-centered ontology would disturb all ideas of self-contained beings and becomings and would work towards a general reconsideration of space and time as socially produced morphogenetic techniques for mastering the immanent agency of matter.

Through relating her arguments concerning space and being-in-the-world to modern art, Hooper's





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essay leads to the final contribution of the book, in which Kitty Zijlmans, professor of contemporary art history and theory at Leiden University, theorizes the concept of place from an art-historical and phenomenological perspective. Zijlmans defines place as a site where memories play a vital role. An undefined space will turn into place, a *particular* place, if one feels familiar, at home or at ease there; if one goes back to the past to relive long-ago events; or if some special object is venerated or remembered. In fact, many artworks in which (documentary) photography, film, or installations are applied play with and refer to this quality of place. However, what appears to be documentary evidence of a specific site often works as a dislocation—the site stimulates the flow of thought and memories but at the same time it makes one painfully aware of the fact that this is not the actual site. Site can thus refer to losses as well as gains. Zijlmans exemplified this idea on the basis of three case studies: photographic work by the American photographer Susan Meiselas, photo works and a photo installation by the Amsterdam-based Chinese artist Ni Haifeng, and the use of photographs in multimedia/video works by the Scottish/Dutch artist duo Elsa Stansfield and Madelon Hooykaas.

More often than not, theoretical debates about art take place among theorists, who tend to neglect the input of artists. In the discussion on contemporary art and the reflection on the concept of place in photography





in the context of multimedia artworks, it is most relevant that artists participate to address the theme from the perspective of artistic practice. The artists Pieter Laurens Mol and Batia Suter were asked to contribute to this volume through making a selection of their works. Although the relation between their work and this volume's theme is obvious, I would like to point out some specific aspects of how their works deal with the concept of place and the application of photography in a multimedial context.

In one of his early photographs, *Untitled* 1978 (fig. 1), the Dutch artist Pieter Laurens Mol places himself/the artist literally between two extreme ways of perceiving “place”: through a microscope and through a telescope. By sawing a table in half—as a kind of spatial performance—he interrogates and complicates his position as an artist. Mol's photograph *Spirit Level* (fig. 2) seems to ask the viewer whether the direction of the smoke and the level of the fluid in the bottle are real or indicative of the artist's angle or position. The artist appears to be the place of illusion and deception of the eye (*trompe l'oeil*).

The installations, in which Mol combines photographs with other artistic media or with ready-made objects (figs. 3-8), deal with the concept of place in another but even more complex way. *The Book of Evidence* (fig. 5) and *The Anonymous Testimony* (fig. 4) consist of a photograph in combination with, respectively, a neatly arranged row of roofing tiles on the floor and several random piles of such tiles. The real place of





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the viewer and the place elsewhere in the photograph merge as a result of the presence of the tiles which are both related to the photograph and to the location of the spectator. So to which “place” exactly is the artwork referring? The title *The Anonymous Testimony* turns that question even into an issue of good or bad fate, by referring to the Dutch proverb that involves a crow: if it flies over your house, you will find love, but if it lands on your house, it means you will run into bad luck.¹ The place created by Mol in the artwork is neither a here nor a there. Determining the location of “smell,” which Mol integrated in his work *The Immediate Fermentation* (figs. 6 and 7) is complicated in a different way. You can see where the smell comes from, but is its place limited by the quality of the observer’s nasal organ or by the walls of the room? And what about the place of the artist, who is present in the photographs/installation as a sort of phantom? This question interrogates again the place of the artist in his own work.

On account of the integration of photographs in spatial installations, Mol’s photographs interact more strongly with the surrounding space than in the case of an autonomous presentation on a wall of an exhibition room. The photographic works by the Swiss/Dutch artist Batia Suter capitalize on the interdependence of photography and architecture to an even larger extent. The photograph of a huge hole in a wall (fig. 11), which covers a whole wall of a room, offers a view of a next wall which is broken through in almost an





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identical rectangular form. The work has a strong impact on the experience of the room in which the photograph is presented. Instead of referring to another place, as photography usually does, the optical effect of *trompe l'oeil* overrules the knowledge that it is only a photograph. It appears to be even hard to imagine that we look at a photograph of a place elsewhere. But what happens if the same photograph is printed on a curtain which covers most of a wall (fig. 12)? This photograph, it seems, is physically more present in the room of the spectator than the 'flat' one with the receding effect. Still, these two different ways of presenting the same photograph also suggest that these works deal with two different forms of transparency. Whereas we seldom ignore the surface of a painting, we tend to disregard the photograph as an object and we immediately look at what it depicts. The same applies to Suter's works. We are not attracted by their surface. The flat photograph on the wall (fig. 11) deals with transparency in a figurative way: we ignore the wall and experience an open space. With regard to the print on the curtain (fig. 12), we experience the curtain as transparent, allowing us to see the next room.

By using monumental formats, Suter's photographs interfere strongly in the environment in which they are presented. Much like architects or interior designers, Suter knows that experiences of place and space depend strongly on visual effects. Her work

¹ Dan Cameron in: Marente Bloemheuvel, Pieter Laurens Mol: Grand Promptness. Breda: Artimo Foundation, 2000 [1996], 28.





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underscores the artificiality of the disciplinary division of architecture and visual arts as separate fields within art history—a view for which the essay by Caroline van Eck only provides further evidence.

The aim of this volume is to provide a basis for future theoretical research of concepts of place in photography. The participating authors and artists offer exploratory and complementary studies from multimedial and multidisciplinary perspectives. As such, this volume seeks to elucidate the importance of studying photography in contemporary multimedia artworks for the purpose of developing theories of place in photography.

