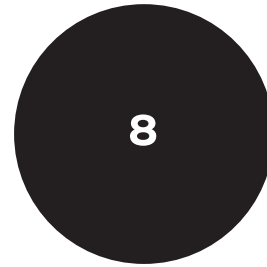




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## **View. Theories and Practices of Visual Culture.**

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*Time Saturation: The Photography of Awoiska van der Molen*

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## **Time Saturation: The Photography of Awoiska van der Molen**

None can deny that present time lacks any extension because it passes in a flash. Yet attention is continuous, and it is through this that what will be present progresses towards being absent. So the future, which does not exist, is not a long period of time. A long future is a long expectation of the future. And the past, which has no existence, is not a long period of time. A long past is a long memory of the past.

Augustinus, *Confessions*<sup>1</sup>

We are inclined to assume that photography deals with space and film with time. For the temporal dimension of photography is minimal – the proverbial flash – whereas space is represented maximally, that is in the smallest detail. The moving images of film do exactly what photography is unable to do: to fixate the continuity of time.

When we stand in front of the photographs of Awoiska van der Molen it becomes clear immediately that this characterization of the two media is too simple. Although we see again and again landscapes of mountains, trees, leaves, or stones, it is especially in the temporal domain that we are immersed. In her work the tangibility of time seems at first sight to be the result of the technical processes she employs. The landscapes, mostly taken during the night or early morning, are made with shutter speeds of almost fifteen minutes. And then follows the meticulous process of printing on barite paper, which also requires a lot of time. This sequence of slow processes is later readable in her work and explains the tangible slowness emanating from it. Yet, this explanation is too easy. For the procedures underlying these photographs might only be readable indexically, and only for experts, who are still familiar with the craftsmanship of analog photography. The tangibility of time in



Awoiska van der Molen, #346-18, silver gelatin print, courtesy of the artist

her work is, however, not produced by an indexical production of meaning. Her photographs are more than just an index of the invisible time that preceded them in order to make them. What strikes us is that while looking at them we end up in another temporal dimension. I would like to contend that we experience that other dimension of time.

At first it seems that I can best characterize this temporal experience negatively. Writing on the work of Tehching Hsieh, Adrian Heathfield claims the following:

Long durations such as those of Hsieh's lifeworks can be contrasted with the temporality of eventhood ascribed to much performance work. Extended duration lacks the distinction that separates the event from the mundane, the everyday: the bracketing off and casting out of experience into the domain of the "uneventful" through which the event, as heightened experience, must necessarily be constituted.<sup>2</sup>



Awoiska van der Molen, #351-10, silver gelatin print, courtesy of the artist

This negative characterization makes clear that the best-known and respected photographic practices have used the medium of photography to fix the temporality of events. Snapshots aspire to fixate the moment, which is, as it is said, pregnant with history; a history that should all be readable from that one single moment. The work of Awoiska van der Molen, however, has little affinity with this temporality of the unique moment. More positively, Heathfield describes the temporality of *duration* as follows:

Duration deals in the confusion of temporal distinctions – between past, present and future – drawing the spectator into the thick braids of paradoxical times. [...] One might say, then, that duration nearly always involves the collapse of objective measure. Whether it is short or long in 'clock time', its passage will be marked by a sense of the warping of time, an opening of regularity to other phenomena or inchoate orders. Duration will often be accompanied by the spatial sense of expansion, suspension or collapse or by reverential, chaotic or cosmic phenomena, as notions of temporal distinctions are undone. Time arises in the experience of

duration, in its indivisibility and its incapacity to become an object of thought, analysis or representation.<sup>3</sup>

The notion of time at stake here has been called *durée* by French philosopher Henri Bergson, in English 'duration'. Duration does not concern a conceptualisation of time, not a way of thinking about time; it concerns a phenomenology of time, the way we experience time. Before elaborating on Bergson's notion of duration, I will first reflect on the question of what it means that Awoiska van der Molen's photographic images evoke a temporality that thwarts the temporality of the unique moment, that which has become so prevailing in the most dominant photographic practices.

Her use of analog photography and the traditional processes that are part of it, could create the impression that her images result from nostalgia for times in which digitalism was not yet predominant. The continuously increasing stream of images to which we are exposed today and the massive consumptive and exhibitionistic use of photography made possible by digital technology would then account for a counter response, a return to times when photography was still respected. Instead, I contend that the photographic practice of Van der Molen should be seen as a critical reflection on the medium of photography, a reflection that is necessary today because the taking and distribution of photographs has become an obsessive and compulsive, hence unreflected, ritual. In the terms of Brazilian theoretician Vilém Flusser, one could say that Van der Molen makes visible 'the program of the medium photography'.



Awoiska van der Molen, #326-5, silver gelatin print, courtesy of the artist

In his *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* Flusser argues that 'technical images' such as photographs are usually seen as 'symptoms of the world'.<sup>4</sup> Viewers read the photographed world instead of the photographic image. This is because photographs have the reputation to be objective and not symbolic. As a result viewers do not relate to photographs as images, but as specific ways of looking at the world. "Their criticism is not an analysis of their production but an analysis of the world". (15) For Flusser technical images do not offer a transparent view on the world, on trees or mountains in the case of Awoiska van der Molen. Photographic

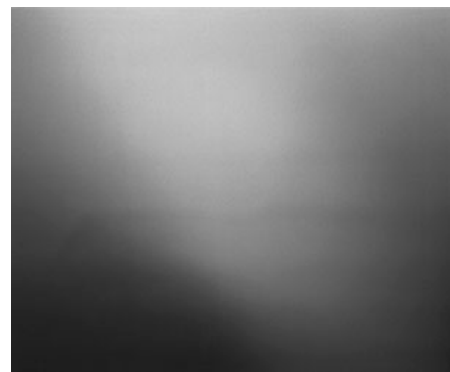
images are utterly symbolic, which implies that we do not see the World in photographs, but concepts of the world. In order to understand photographs adequately we have to consider them as conceptual, which means that we have to be aware of the translations that have taken place from world to image in the photographic technology. The technology, however, discourages this awareness:

The function of technical images is to liberate their receivers by magic from the necessity of thinking conceptually, at the same time replacing historical consciousness with a second-order magical consciousness and replacing the ability to think conceptually with a second-order imagination. (17)

For Flusser something like naïve, non-conceptual photography does not exist, since a photograph is by definition an image of concepts. These concepts, which Flusser also called categories, form together 'the program of the camera'. It is especially the current, fully automatic camera, that makes this program completely invisible. With the digital revolution photographic concepts or categories have become part of the unconsciousness of the photographic image. It is the task of the philosophy and criticism of photography to bring back to light the program of the photographic image. Besides the aesthetics of the photographer, a coding in the second degree according to Flusser, the concepts of the camera also have to be 'decoded'. (48)

### **The Translation of Colour**

The question that now imposes itself is which translations do take place in the camera? What are those photographic concepts or translations? Flusser is not very explicit about this. He mentions only a few. The most recognizable one is the translation to black and white. From Flusser's point of view, the fact that Awoiska van der Molen only photographs in black and white does not entail an aesthetic of nostalgic preference for an early phase in the history of photography. On the contrary, it is a critical position. Black-and-white photographs are more concrete, which means more 'true'. Black-and-white is 'true', not because there are situations in the world which are black-and-white; for they have colour. They are 'true' because they show their origin in an optical theory. Black and white are theoretical concepts in the theory of optics: "black is the total



Awoiska van der Molen, #336-12, silver gelatin print, courtesy of the artist

absence of all oscillations contained in light, while the total presence of all the elements of oscillation" (42). That is why black-and-white photographs are images of concepts that belong to the theory of optics, they are generated by that theory. Black-and-white photographs are beautiful because of the beauty of the conceptual universe, according to Flusser.

Colour photographs have their origin in a theory different from the optical one, namely a chemical theory. In this kind of photography translations and conversions also take place. The colours in photographs are exactly like black and white concepts. But the difference from black-and-white photographs is that colour photography veils its theoretical origin. "The 'more genuine' the colours of the photograph become, the more untruthful they are, the more they conceal their theoretical origin" (44). So, it is a misunderstanding to think that the colours of colour photography come directly, automatically on the surface of a photograph. The chemical translations on which they are based, are, however, invisible.

In the photographs of Awoiska van der Molen the translation to black-and-white is emphasized even more when they have been taken during the evening or early morning. The long shutter speeds needed in those cases make us aware of the fact that light, the white, is not self-evident, but the result of a process. Initially, everything was dark, hence, black. The transition from darkness to light is a process that takes time, like the optical translation to black and white. Van der Molen's photographic practice seems to foreground the biblical trope that light is created in the wake of darkness.

### **The Translation of Time**

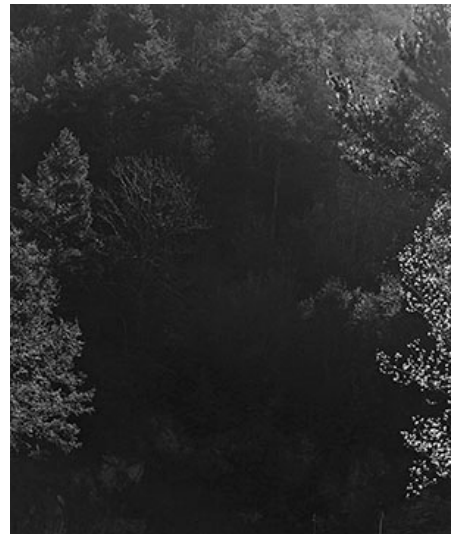
Although a photograph provides a spatial image, it also has a temporal dimension that is highly specific. This explains why in so many definitions of photography the temporal dimension is even more central than the spatial one. After Roland Barthes apprehended photography as a fixing of past time in *Camera Lucida* (1980), it has become common to consider photography as a confrontation with the awareness that time passes and that any photographed moment belongs to the past: *ça a été*.<sup>5</sup> This temporal dimension is twofold: it concerns



Awoiska van der Molen, #245-18, silver gelatin print, courtesy of the artist

only one single moment, and that moment does not belong to the present anymore but to the past. But because of the fact that we, by definition, are looking in the present to that past moment, we are penetrated by the awareness of the passing of time. When we look at a photograph we experience the temporal movement from present to past and back. This view of the temporal dimension of photography seems completely self-evident because of the kind of photographic practices that have become dominant in the twentieth century. Snapshots but also journalistic photography concentrate on the unique moment, or the special history. These practices represent this moment, the unique event, aiming at the future. As I have argued before, Awoiska van der Molen's photographs have little affinity with this temporal dimension. Although her images are completely saturated with time, they never concern a unique moment, or special event. It is rather a form of 'uneventfulness' that defines her photographs. In her work time is translated in such a way that events no longer play any role. This alternative translation of time does not cancel the temporal dimension, but it makes viewers relate to it differently.

But, as Geoffry Batchen has argued, it is only this view of the temporal dimension of photography in terms of the moment that belongs to the past that makes understandable why we sometimes feel extremely uncomfortable when we look at photographs. Looking at photographs can make us aware of the fact that time passes because the represented moment belongs to the past. Ultimately, every photograph predicts our death. But this view does not explain why we want to look at some photographs again and again. This attraction is not generated by the viewers' macabre necrophiliac fascination. On the contrary. Batchen argues that the reputation of Barthes' *Camera Lucida* is based on a one-sided reading of it. Barthes, he says, would have written his book from a fascination for that which is dead but is represented in such a way that it comes to life again.



Awoiska van der Molen, #274-5, silver gelatin print, courtesy of the artist

Accordingly, on the same page in *Camera Lucida*, where he comments on the 'catastrophe', inherent to all photographs, he also concedes that there is 'always a defeat of time in them'. Looking at an old snapshot of two little girls, he exclaims 'how alive they are!'<sup>6</sup>

What strikes Barthes in this photograph is that in their photographic portrait the girls look dead as well as alive, hence as neither. The photograph eliminates the passing of time. It is especially the medium of photography that is able to defer time in this way.

The dimension of time suggested by Barthes does not defer time as such, but the passing of time. This passing implies that time is linear and can be measured: one moment after the other. Hence, a chronology. Barthes, however, seems to imply another notion, or better, experience, of time; one in which different temporal dimensions exist next to each other. Earlier I referred to Henri Bergson and his notion of duration. Duration concerns an experience of time instead of a conceptualization of time as chronology. This experience does not allow temporal distinctions or divisions; in this experience time cannot be measured objectively.

In his book *Matter and Memory* Bergson claims that perception is not a construction but a selection the subject makes on the basis of his/her own interests. Simple and plausible as this idea is, it has changed contemporary thinking about representation radically. For a long time representation was considered in terms of mimesis, understood as imitation, or in terms of its opposite: construction.<sup>7</sup> But if perception, and in consequence, also representation is selection, the emphasis shifts from the object to the subject of perception. According to Bergson perception is an act performed by the body and for the body. And this act takes place in the present. Although this act is performed in the present, it is closely connected to memory. At the end of his study Bergson writes the following:

In concrete perception memory intervenes, and the subjectivity of sensible qualities is due precisely to the fact that our consciousness, which begins by being only memory, prolongs a plurality of moments into each other, contracting them into a single intuition.<sup>8</sup>

This plurality of moments should not be understood as a narrative sequence, but rather as a form of stasis in which several temporal dimensions converge. Memory, which makes itself felt during perception, consists of a plurality of moments, but without the possibility of disentangling this plurality into specific moments in relation to each other, e.g., one moment after another. According to Gilles Deleuze, Bergsonian *duration* is not defined by sequentiality but by co-existence.<sup>9</sup> And this co-existence does not consist of specific moments, because according to Bergson



time is indivisible and continuously subject to change. However, it concerns different temporal dimensions such as present and past, which can only be experienced at the same time, in relation to each other.

The photographs of Awoiska van der Molen seem to be an embodiment of Bergson's notion of duration. By embodiment I don't mean a visualization of the progress of time, as is done in narrative images. In her work time has become tangible. This tangibility made it possible for Roland Barthes to be aware of the fact that the two girls

in the photograph he looked at belonged to the past, or were even dead, and at the same time to be amazed by their liveliness and their being-alive. That is why it is significant that the photographs of Van der Molen are consistently uneventful. In fact, only images like the portraits Barthes was looking at, or the kind of landscapes and suburban areas Van der Molen photographs, that can make time tangible in this specific way; because nothing happens in them, time can spread out in them in utter passivity.

When nothing happens in photographs, only the present in which the photograph is being looked at remains. Writing about On Kawara's series of "Today" paintings Jean-Luc Nancy argues that time presents itself in its most pure form in the present: "The present in time is nothing: it is pure time, the pure present of time, and thus its pure presence, that is the negativity of its passing. From 'already no longer' to 'not yet' is a passage without pause, a step not taken, neither disposed nor exposed, inexposable, only and ceaselessly depositing all things."<sup>10</sup> The landscapes of Van der Molen are in no way to be understood as representations of time, as the exact time of their being taken seems to have been cancelled. The landscapes open themselves up for the experience of time because while looking at them there is only a present that never stops: we remain in that present. According to Nancy this is pure time, according to Bergson, duration.

### The Translation of Space

Some years ago, from 2006 until 2008, Awoiska van der Molen made photographs of undefined suburban places. This series of works is titled *Far From the Maddening Crowd*. Her current work consists of 'pure' landscapes in which no trace of human



Awoiska van der Molen, #206-18, silver gelatin print, courtesy of the artist

habitation or activity is visible. What the earlier works have in common with the more recent ones is the 'uneventfulness' I have mentioned. The lack of events and specific moments seems to be combined with the spaces she selects for her photographs: landscapes. Again, it is Bergson who offers possibilities to understand the kind of space central in Van der Molen's work. According to Bergson space is not geometrical, as in the case of Renaissance linear perspective. When space is not geometrical it cannot be measured, and it is not identical for all those who are in that space. Our relation to space develops according a 'natural feeling'. So, like duration, space cannot be itemized or measured. In his book *Time and Free Will* he calls space an extension emanated from the subject.<sup>11</sup>



Awoiska van der Molen, #323-7, silver gelatin print, courtesy of the artist

This notion of space seems to resonate in the term landscape. The term landscape refers to a space in the external world as well as to a representation of it. In the latter meaning landscape is a genre within figurative art. In the first meaning, landscape is a material reality designed by and for humans. This ambiguity is not a coincidence but utterly significant. In the words of Mieke Bal:

The term landscape indicates a humanized relationship to nature, whether this relationship is one of dominion, of self-affirmation through the conquest of nature, or, on the contrary, a desire to transcend and efface the self in the face of nature, as what we since Kant call "the sublime". Both attitudes spring from a fundamental discontentment with the limitations of human embodied existence. Attempts to separate the two appearances of landscape – as outside and as representation – are themselves imbricated in such conceptions, in either attitude just mentioned or in the paradox of their coexistence.<sup>12</sup>

The translation of space that is at stake in photographic technology seems at first sight a mechanical translation of nature into culture. The ordering that takes place through the optical lens is by definition that of linear perspective. The kind of landscapes made by Van der Molen by means of her camera seem to be consistently immune to this mechanical translation. The landscapes she selects for her images do not undergo such a translation convincingly. The familiar ordering

according to the principles of linear perspective does not have any grip on them. Like the term landscape, which does not allow for a clear distinction between nature and culture, Van der Molen's landscapes similarly seem to annul this distinction. But in the case of her so-called landscapes we seem to be confronted with real, pure nature, at least at first sight. For human or technological ordering of them doesn't seem to have taken place.

Western culture knows two traditional topoi that locate nature outside culture. Both are evoked by Van der Molen's landscapes, after which they are countered. The first one is that of the biblical paradise, the Garden of Eden, the place of pure nature because guilt did not yet exist. The second one is the Kantian idea of the sublime as experience that is post-cultural.<sup>13</sup> When man is located with his back to civilization and eye to eye with wild oceans or steep mountains, he has an experience that is supposed to be outside the familiar possibilities of representation. We call such an experience sublime.

The landscapes of Van der Molen are a combination of these two extremes of pure nature. They are like paradise as well as sublime, because they look most like the way we imagine nature to have looked after creation. The creation of earth and heaven described in Genesis 1, takes several days. God makes distinctions between light and darkness, between sea and land. It is clear that it is a laborious job for God to make these distinctions. Again and again there is a moment of rest and contemplation in which he looks back at what he has just created. The famous words: "And God saw that it was good" return like a refrain, closure of a busy day on which a lot of work has been done. Again and again Van der Molen's landscapes seem to represent this moment of rest after a process of creation. The undefined temporal dimension, between day and night, contributes to this effect. It always concerns a transition, a moment of rest within an overwhelming process. What we then see, or what we look back to is like paradise because it is untouched. The term



Awoiska van der Molen, #202-10, silver gelatin print, courtesy of the artist



Awoiska van der Molen, #343-18, silver gelatin print, courtesy of the artist

'Garden of Eden' is, however, not really appropriate, because her landscapes do not know the ordering that gardens have. Paradise only becomes a Garden of Eden on the sixth day, the day on which God created man and woman. Van der Molen shows paradise only in its sublime state, which means during the first five days of creation.

But both topoi of pure nature lose their persuasiveness as analogies of Van der Molen's landscapes when we realise that the landscapes in question are nothing less than human-made. Paradise-like landscapes, as well as wild, sublime landscapes, are perhaps not really representable in their undifferentiatedness within an ordering imposed mechanically by an optical lens. The distinctions made by God in the design of his paradise demonstrate this, because they illustrate what culture is all about: to make differences. The photographs of Awoiska van der Molen are emphatically moments of looking back. Looking back at landscapes that withdraw from culture. This implies that it is culture that has produced these natural landscapes. In other words, paradise has not been created by God but by Awoiska van der Molen.

## Footnotes

- 1 Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford – New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), xxviii (37), 243.
- 2 Adrian Heathfield, "Thought of Duration", in Heathfield (ed.), *Out of Now: The Lifeworks of Tehching Hsieh* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2009), 22.
- 3 Heathfield, *ibid.*, 22.
- 4 Vilém Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*. Translated by A. Mathews. (London: Reaktion Books 2000)
- 5 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. Translated by Richard Howard (London: Fontana, 1984)
- 6 Geoffrey Batchen, "Life and Death", in *Suspending Time: Life-Photography-Death*. (Shizuoka: Izu Photo Museum, 2010), 108
- 7 See Mieke Bal, "Stasis: How to See", in *Trine Sondergaard*. (Ostfildern: Hatje

Cantz, 2013), 12

8 Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory* [1896], trans. N.M. Paul and W.S. Palmer (New York: Zone Books, 1991), 60

9 Gilles Deleuze, *Bergsonism*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (New York: Zone Books, 1988), 60

10 Jean-Luc Nancy, "The Technique of the Present", in A. Groom (ed.), *Time: Documents of Contemporary Art*. (London: Whitechapel Gallery, 2013), 104-15

11 Henri Bergson, *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness* [1889], trans. F.L. Pogson (New York: Harper and Row, 1960)

12 Mieke Bal, "Timely Remains", in *Jussi Niva: Timely Remains*. (Helsinki: Parvus Publishing, 2010), 89

13 See Mieke Bal, *ibid.*, 89