

# A GLITCH IN PHOTOGRAPHY

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[EN]

## **Abstract**

*When thinking of Photography, the same rectangular shape pops into our minds. Notwithstanding how fixed and logical this may seem, 21<sup>st</sup> century Photography has started to show signals that move away from its conventional format. The presence of Photography — in spatial, virtual and verbal ways — is being revisited. In many art practices today, participation and engagement play a role of increasing importance. For Photography as a form-bound practice the interaction with not only the eyes but also the body of the viewer is difficult. Contemporary experimental photographers tend to somewhat reject visual limitations due to paper size or screen format, and make space for the sudden and unexpected, both within and outside the photographic system. With the two artists Katharina Gaenssler (DE, 1974) and Rosa Menkman (NL, 1983) as case-studies, this article will show the integration of the uncertainty principle in the field of Photography. Here, manual craft and digital exploration cross paths in order to reach an updated body-brain achievement for Photography in agreement with our current times. Rather than standing still, the viewer is compelled to walk around in order to grasp not only the visual dimension of the photograph but also its level of impact. The work of the 21<sup>st</sup> century photographer appeals to the body as sentimental.*

## **Keywords**

*21<sup>st</sup> century Photography, Katharina Gaenssler, Rosa Menkman, uncertainty principle, act of walking.*

[PT]

### **Resumo**

*Ao pensar em fotografia, a mesma forma retangular surge nas nossas mentes. Não obstante o quão fixo e lógico isto possa parecer, a fotografia do séc. XXI começou a mostrar sinais que se afastam do seu formato convencional. A presença da fotografia – em modos espaciais, virtuais e verbais – tem vindo a ser revisitada. Em várias práticas artísticas atuais, a participação e o comprometimento desempenham um papel cada vez mais importante. Para a fotografia, enquanto forma-limite, a interação não só com os olhos mas com o corpo do espectador é difícil. Os fotógrafos contemporâneos experimentais tendem, de alguma maneira, a rejeitar as limitações visuais ditadas pelo tamanho do papel ou pelo formato da tela, procurando abrir espaço para o súbito e o inesperado, tanto dentro como fora do sistema fotográfico. Tomando as duas artistas Katharina Gaenssler (Alemanha, 1974) e Rosa Menkman (Holanda, 1983) como casos de estudo, este artigo demonstrará a integração do princípio de incerteza no campo da fotografia. Aqui, ofício manual e exploração digital atravessam caminhos com vista ao alcance de uma atualizada conquista corpo-cérebro da fotografia, de acordo com o tempo corrente. Ao invés de permanecer imóvel, o espectador é compelido a deambular a fim de compreender quer a dimensão visual da fotografia, quer também o seu nível de impacto. O trabalho do fotógrafo do séc. XXI apela ao corpo como sentimental.*

### **Palavras-chave**

*Fotografia do séc. XXI, Katharina Gaenssler, Rosa Menkman, princípio da incerteza, ato de caminhar.*



## I. Introduction: Incomplete, and in no particular order

While the possible death and the near future of “the image” have been a popular topic of debate within many books and exhibitions, the actual appearance of the image today seems to have been left in the middle (of something). The objects and performances that now can make up photography are singled out and presented in the form of monograph publications and small group shows, so bit by bit we can get used to the idea of a changed practice of photography. By giving these attempts non-defining titles such as “New pictures of common objects”, they underscore that the status of photography is officially uncertain. A general reaction is to wait for a more matured answer towards experimental image production - that is, at those places in the art scene where a photograph is only recognized as such when conformed to its conventional format. MoMa PS1, for example, holds within its mission to be «a catalyst and an advocate for new ideas, discourses and trends in contemporary art» and was able to pay sole attention, very early on, to the careers of young artists that in some way part with photographic thought, like Cyprien Gaillard (FR, 1980) or Trisha Baga (USA, 1985). The current growth of photo installations creates another challenge, not only for curators but also for Photography critics who have great difficulty to locate them within existing theories. With a very real chance of conflict, the philosophers who largely determined twentieth-century theory are being pushed into the background in order to avoid repetitive discussions and to focus on actual changes in the current creation and reception of photography.

This article aims to reflect on some of Photography's under-challenged practices and theories. As an exploration of Photography as flexible format, it deals with the image in movement. This way, the article zooms into the spatial, virtual and verbal dimensions that circulate amongst experimental photographers, or rather artists who work with photography. With the two artists Katharina Gaenssler (DE, 1974) and Rosa Menkman (NL, 1983) as case-studies, an analysis will show the integration of the uncertainty principle in the very core of today's photos. We can



Figure 1— *A Glitch Timond*, 2014, static images of mixed technique, mounted on foam board, 160 x 130 cm © Rosa Menkman



see what happens when visual limitations due to paper size or screen format are somewhat rejected and space is allocated for the sudden and the unexpected. Derived from both within and outside the photographic system, their manual and digital methods seem to appeal to our senses and sentiments in novel ways, activating the body like the greater part of contemporary art does. Also, the domain in which the artists themselves move is defined, the effect of pioneering predecessors is suggested, and the alienated experiences their work generates is described. This survey embraces the glitch as a sparkle of potential for photography.

## II. Directors of Photography

Photography holds within its power to envision the world in ways that the naked human eye could never perceive it, and has done so for over 175 years. For all this time the notions of the artistic range of Photography that both artists and critics have harbored have been paradoxical rather than ambiguous in nature, leading up to no real shift in definition. In essence, many hang onto the idea that Photography was born a whole” (John Swarkowski, 1966 in Westgeest , 2011: 20) call it an organism that can grow but never change from within. New beginnings often provide the chance to radically redirect the course of something - it is the editor of *Elephant* magazine, Robert Shore, who lets the early 21<sup>st</sup> century redefine the photographic sublime, caused by the so-called “post-photographic generation” (Shore, 2014: 73). With this, he intends to locate the increasing number of artists with a camera that produce photos with very diverse impacts. Attempts are made to direct a new life for Photography as it continues «to inspire and fascinate, but also to irritate and provoke a lot of artists» (Ebner, 2014: 11).

### *Maybe art could include other things*

Conceptual Art, Performance Art and New Media Art offer a relatively clear understanding on its origin, format and impact. The recent mixture of these genres that seem to intersect with Photography today remains less obvious. Material, conceptual and experiential investigations of former artist generations have paved the way for current experimental photography. Artists like Gordon Matta-Clark, Jan Dibbets, Andrea Fraser and John Baldessari have stretched the visual language of

Photography. «Why am I just using photography for a reference? Do I have to translate photography into painting to make it art? Maybe art could include other things» were some of the questions that Baldessari asked himself when making photographic images (Baldessari, 2012: 154). By including “art signals” like text and cut-outs into self-made or appropriated photographs, artists in the 1960's created the first modern defaults onto photographic logic. Formal dimensions were questioned, and historical sentiments were left out or formulated convenient connotations to use. The previous competition with painting slowly became regarded as presenting photography in a way that is «neither natural nor necessary» (Snyder & Allen, 1975 in *Westgeest*, 2011: 17). What does seem natural for photography is to set out a less linear route, which now means to include performance and new media. Artists explore the width and depth of the art and its cultural field without setting its roots in one place. In doing so, art critic Nicolas Bourriaud argues that they create a new radical aesthetic that brings space and time closely together (Bourriaud, 2010: 79). Whether photographing different subjects, presenting them as different subjects, or shaping photographs themselves into new subjects, the course of change seems to be set by interdisciplinary exchange.

*I am not a camera*

Away from their usual environment, artists are drawn to Photography for centuries. The reasons range from having an “extra pair of eyes” on their work by means of study or documentary, to actually creating a picture or using the information overload that the photographic image can provide. From Eugène Delacroix, Tracey Emin or indeed John Baldessari – they have not called themselves photographers. Many of the artists today do not even actually use a camera to produce their work, inspired by post-photographic practices before them: «I did not need a reflected, pictorial image to make a photograph», Lew Thomas concluded in the 1980's after developing a structuralist approach towards photography (O'Toole, 2014: 14). By not “thinking photography”, the very nature of photographic perception continues to be explored today.

To Katharina Gaenssler, who is a former silversmith, working with an ordinary Nikon reflex camera is of absolutely no importance. «I would never say that I'm a photographer. If I have to define my artist-being in plain words I would



Figure 2— *KdeE (Cathedral of Erotic Misery)*, 2010. 3271 photographs, colour laser prints, 590 x 1760 cm at Ephemer, Munich, photo by Florian Holzherr, Munich © Katharina Gaenssler

rather work with sculptor» (Gaenssler, 2015). This mainly concerns the process towards her physical installations like *KdeE*, as only in the preparatory phase the use of her camera is needed for taking thousands and thousands of photos. «It's about my process, not about delivering photographs. To me, photographing is hard and exhausting, but then there's the moving of the images where the haptic comes out, which is wonderful» (Gaenssler, 2015 ). This practice distances itself from visually comparable artists like David Hockney or Annette Messager. They also use a somewhat large amount of photos for their installations, but the main focus lays on the actual prints and, more importantly, on the void that these prints create. Hockney notes that this is a dark void where we are confronted with the limitations of ourselves as human beings (Westgeest, 2011: 134). Gaenssler, on the other hand, seems to confront us with the limitations of the camera: to take us into her universe, she produces at least ten times as many photographs than later appear in her installations.





Figure 3— *The Collapse of PAL 2010*, video still; analogue PAL signal, broken digital camera, teletext, digital compression artifacts, video bending artifacts at TV-TV, Copenhagen © Rosa Menkman

A rhetorical fear for what is outside of the picture frame can now be replaced by an introspective view with endless possibilities. Originally a cultural media researcher, Rosa Menkman was inspired by *Jodi.org*, a collective of two Dutch “Internet artists” (Joahn Heemskerck, Dirk Paesmans), to combine photography with video art. Menkman creates virtual sculptures with two-dimensional footage. To her a camera also holds no added value to the artwork in itself, which we can see in *The collapse of PAL* where she used a broken photo camera to film analog television signals. Here a Danish landscape was recorded as was seen through PAL, the *Phase Alternating Line*, which is the standard analog colour television image. It was made into site-specific performances for several locations in various dimensions and screen settings. Although the blurred outlines of a city skyline bear some visual resemblance to Thomas Ruff’s imagery found on-line of which he made the JPEG series, this result is not a static C-print but a vibrant photo-scape.



*The coordinates*

When working around Photography's conventions, artists easily seem to take its defaults as a vanishing point from which they formulate a new vision on Photography – whatever this vision might be. «While it is important that we resist the allure of a lazy technological determinism, there is something appealing in the view that an understanding of Photography in terms of singular, stable artifacts has been displaced by an appreciation of “networked images”, co-produced and in a constant state of becoming» (Burbridge & Davies, 2014:1). Artists like Gaenssler and Menkman present coordinates of the architectural, the cinematic and the found in the photographic domain. The testing of new artifacts to discover new ideas and vice versa forms the very basis of their artistic experiments.

**III. In the Sandbox**

The domain in which Katharina Gaenssler, Rosa Menkman and many other young artists test and invent can be compared to a *sandbox*. This term, though originally applied to software development, is a useful designation for their rather gray artistic working terrain. It offers a testing ground isolated from the production environment, and as such creates space for experimenting with untested codes: the photographic material, the shape, the idea that constitutes Photography, and the time at which photography is intercepted. The recipe for Photography as a rectangular C-print on the wall has been so straightforward that even adventurous art collector Charles Saatchi, who supported artists like Damien Hirst from the very beginning, listed his photo possessions according to old art discussions and old photography genres: *True life adventures*, *Fiction and artifice* and *Places portraits still lives tableaux* (Maloney, 2001: 3). Yet no longer is the place of photography that of representation.

*The Tillmans-effect*

Major societal shifts such as “the affective turn” have changed what we ask of Photography. Photography has to go beyond the visual, and create tensions that directly disturb our emotional state. Moreover, credibility plays a new role in photography, since its truthfulness is now related more toward form than toward

content: Photography has to say something about “now” in novel ways. Wolfgang Tillmans can be said to play a leading role in putting these notions into practice. In the 1990s he adapted Photography to the zeitgeist by making and presenting his photographs in a very ordinary, non-photographic way: a loose composition of the subject captured in an ink-jet print unsystematically hung on the wall with clamps. His work amazed the world of Photography, something he still holds within his power today. «I believe that most things that have new force come about not because you have that intention, thinking in advance about how it is going to be received, but because there are certain reasons for it» (Tillmans, 2005: 3). His body of work conveys the spirits of the age in a profound way by using exploration for the purpose (not to be confused with the function) of taking a first step in a deep artistic process of “rethinking art” in photography. «It is strange that incredibly many people – in particular photographers – have still not understood that Photography can be art. (...) The potential for it to be so was always quite clear to me» (Tillmans, 2005: 4).

#### *Micro-materialistic image processing*

What furthermore characterizes the experimental photographic domain is its adaptation to practical changes. In short, the light, density, and size of the image have changed. Gaenssler deals with these changes and has set out to use alternative ways of image processing to do so. Their background outside of Photography enables them to find a new kind of imagery deconstructed to reach a non-static state. The fact that this is done on the computer is simply part of life itself, as the influence of information technology touches almost every human activity today (Poel, 2013: 43). The digital image serves as material for a mock-up compilation for Katharina Gaenssler or for a data compression for Rosa Menkman. Logically but often overlooked is a common monitor that lays at the beginning of their process: the LCD computer screen. This *Liquid Crystal Display* provides the artists with a different palette to work with as it creates another image perception within our brains. Instead of reflective light, present in the printed image, there is transmissive light, present in the digital image. Without rejecting its part in the process, the blue light is welcomed as a space where images float and things can “go wrong”. Menkman admits that «the glitch makes the computer itself suddenly appear unconventionally deep» (Menkman, 2010: 31). This micro-materialistic view meets the changed position of light, and more important, keeps Photography liquid.



Figure 4— *HD (Turm)* 2012, in process; 4483 photographs colour laser prints, 880 x 1643 cm at Tracing the Grid. The Grid in Art after 1945 Stuttgart, photo by Florian Härle, Stuttgart © Katharina Gaensler





Figure 5— *Vernacular File Formats* 2010, self-portrait, mounted on Dibond 30 x 40 cm  
© Rosa Menkman

### *Blocking the view*

«A layered compilation of geographical moments in time» is what Gaenssler calls her images (Gaenssler, 2015). Along the process she creates intersections and crossovers that cannot exist in reality. She arranges a photo growth that turns singular, linear places into square metres conveying multiple places at once. Within a mock-up universe on her computer, the idea of scale and transportation are very important. An enlase of templates from different sources is how one could describe the work of Rosa Menkman. Her process consists of compressing and destroying photos, something which becomes clear when we look at *Vernacular File Formats*. From a raw image to a joint file, the more she processes the data (pixels) the more the image becomes distorted in such a way that the structure of the file becomes visible. Dimension, size, brightness, colour palette and frequency are changed by means of *blocksplitting*, which means the image is split into tiles or macro-blocks (Menkman, 2011: 22). For Menkman too the transforming of separate layers within one image is



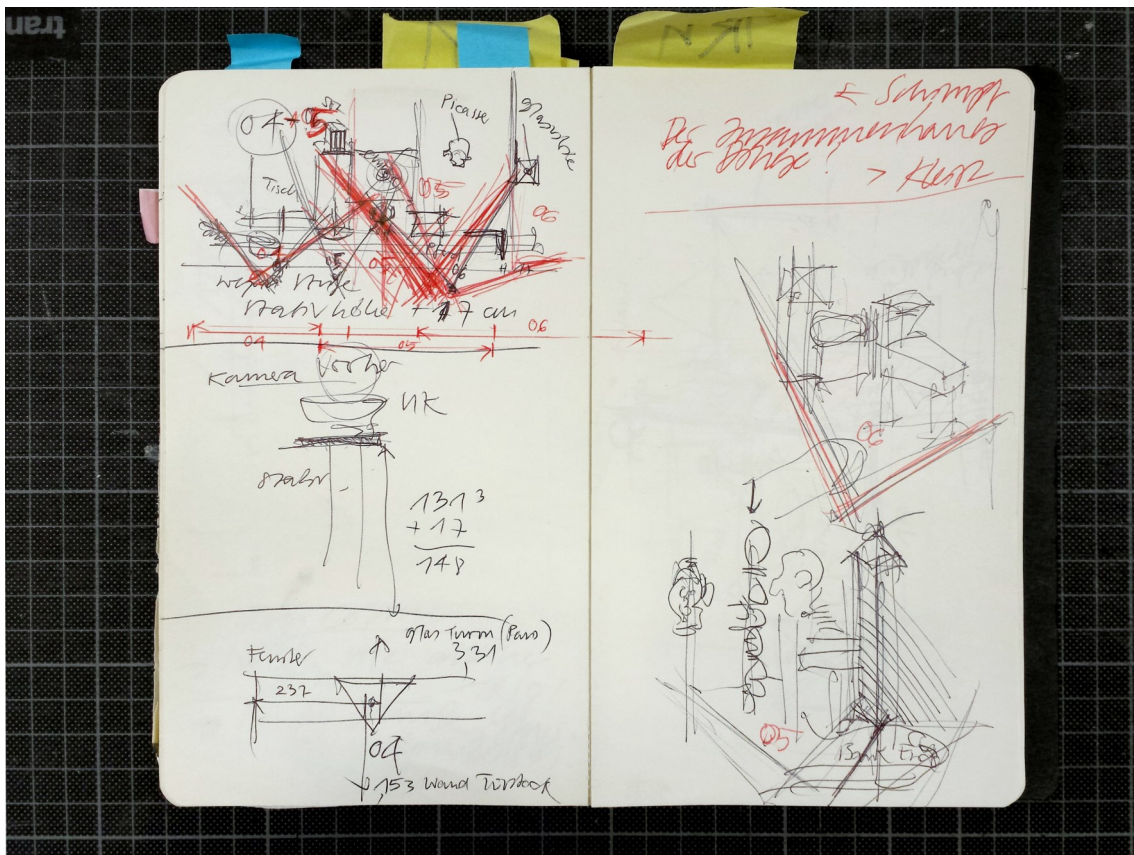


Figure 6— Darstellende geometrie, organizing space at Hanne Darbovens House 2012, sketch in notebook © Katharina Gaenssler

essential. The photograph as the window to the world is changed into the window into its own world. These compressed spaces tend to stretch Photography into the spatial dimensions of an actual installation. Here the horizon that is necessary to signify the photographic image becomes diminished. Controversially, it is the blocks that make the photographic image part ways with its single rectangular format.

### *Performing geometry*

At first, Cubism or Merzbau could resonate in Photography with a “space of object flows” (Stalder, 2002). Today the pixel provides freedom for dynamic movement. An image can be opened up, bent, and broken in favor of site-specific invention. Menkman works with the binary feedback she gets when she sets software and hardware devices against digital photography. The images perform in a language of virtual dimensions, which is something Gaenssler also maintains yet approaches very differently. She finds and defines her positions when photographing (meter by

meter) throughout a certain space. Then she assembles the hundreds of images of one single position, the total of these will then be unfolded out over each other. She spreads the space into a flat drawing by means of *darstellende geometrie*, a German definition which has no English counterpart (except to know that *darstellend* means performing). It is natural for artists today to apply exploratory methods such as these to Photography in order to use the medium for their own personal expression.

#### IV. The uncertainty principle

When an artwork “goes live” by means of an exhibition, book, hyper-link, or download file, viewers can encounter the vision on display at first hand. The artist shares situations which he or she has dealt with over a long period of time – namely, as a jumble of temporary project results – and it is the viewer’s task to make sense of it. Art critic Claire Bishop observes that art today is reigned by aisthesis, i.e. «an autonomous regime of experience that is not reducible to logic, reason or morality» (Bishop, 2012: 18). For Photography as a form-bound practice it is hard to evoke an experience like other arts do, and interact with not only the eyes of the viewer but also their body. Experimental photo installations meet this current demand with abundance as they work with relatively unfamiliar codes that have no fixed means of reception. These photo forms are in need of a new way of relating to Photography, whereto topographical narration by the artist and introspection by the viewer play a key role.

#### *Distraction as reception*

The images, and the layers of images, are in motion which makes it hard to grasp. A theory that has only recently introduced itself fully is that of *Mnemosyne* by visionary art historian Aby Warburg, which is «the iconology of the intervals» (Michaud, 2004: 251). To him, movement is simulated not by «a frozen flash of lightning or a petrified wave» but by visual ruptures and disjunctions, where in between energy is situated (Michaud, 2004: 272). Underlying this is a necessity to reawaken oneself in a series of experienced images that seems very much present today. Leaving Warburg's Botticelli studies and tuning into our own times, we realize that the perception of Gaenssler's work is «always about space and imagining

stories to unfold» (Gaenssler, 2015). The ink-jet prints allow the viewer to step back and attempt to survey the work (or a certain part of it) while allowing close-up colors and paper wrinkles into their field of vision. The place and space of this action vary. And the work is unique in time, as the prints are destroyed after display. The tension disappears, the experience remains. The work is built up by diverse signals and tempos directed to the eye, mind, and body. When we look at Gaenssler's *Carte Blanche*, for example, collected fragments of a white cube environment where the work is installed appear before us as a totality of photographic perspectives. And while the spectators can tear off the images that form a block twenty postcards deep, at no point can they see, know, or sense the 9180 images inside this installation.

The depth of field is uncertain, and stays uncertain. Although some support can be obtained by the haptic, which gives an illusion of having a grip on the subject matter, the audience is left mostly in the dark. Rosa Menkman's work often offers no physical dimension at all, whereto her photographic space is to be explored in yet other ways. A game of push and pull between space and time is derived in virtual interactions. She describes her work *Xilitla* as «an active interplay between readers and writers» (Menkman, 2015). The work presents itself as a two-dimensional application within the video and the game sphere where there are various scripts. Yet, at the same time, it cannot be defined as a video nor as a game. The viewer can walk within the space without having any visual overview or mission whatsoever. A large nonspecific head is floating in between colours, flat lines and geometric shapes. In the work of both artists, a surrealistic situation is created that seems to have its own sense of purpose. Multiple impulses occur at once and as such the viewer becomes confronted with their own being in space. A continuous intensity that increases and decreases along the walk with our feet or computer cursor appeals to our senses. Feelings and ideas change with each image fragment and introduce distraction as a strategy of understanding.

### *Instant chaos*

What *Xilitla* or *Carte Blanche* actually is rather than “an installation” is an attempt to undermine the understandable space of photography. Installations like





Figure 7— *Carte Blanche* 2010, 9180 postcards, 195 x 423 cm at The First Step – The Individual and his Life in the system (Körper Award 6), Hamburg © Katharina Gaenssler



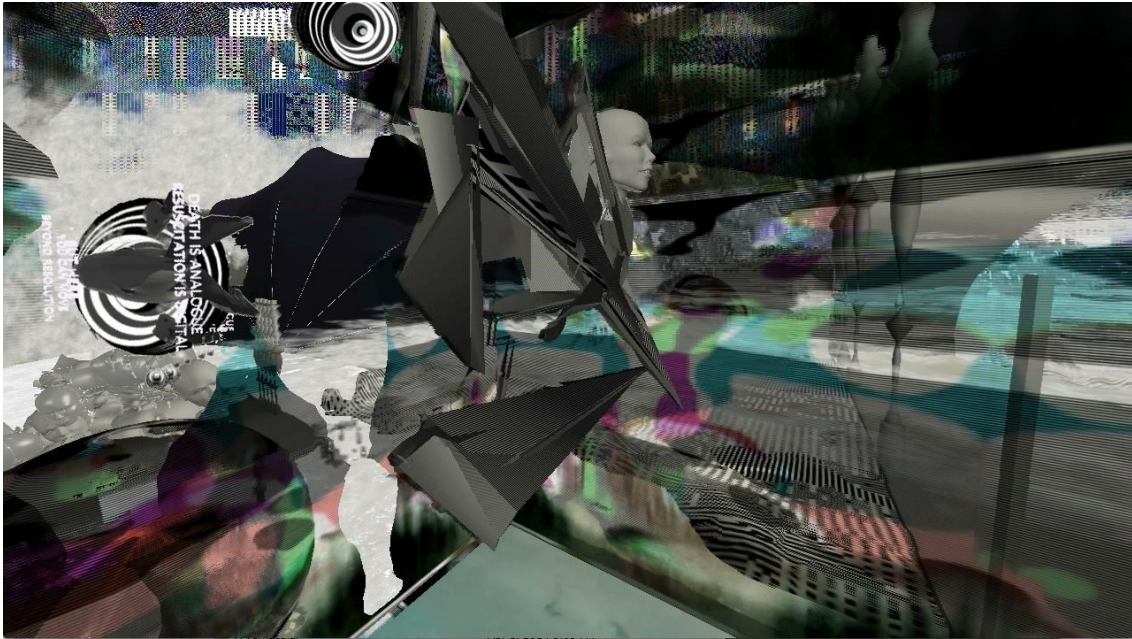


Figure 8— *Xilitla 2012*, still; photo textures, 3D molds, digital compression artifacts, video bending artifacts in 3D digital environment ©Rosa Menkman

these may sometimes attract very aggressive reactions (Gaenssler, 2015), because what is offered is a universe with no vanishing point, conventional vocabulary or navigational route. Menkman believes photography has arrived at a very healthy point where it stretches our ways of perception in order to develop our thoughts freely (Menkman, 2015). A certain space and time is designated for photography to redefine ideas, a practice that shows itself through a checkered scheme. Just like daily chaos appears in front of us as a packed collection of impulses, the crowded regions in the works of Gaenssler and Menkman are quilted. A pack of overlapping visual moments is the result. This does not only deal with printed time or computer time but most importantly with real-time: paces and rhythms evolve while walking or browsing through space in flux. The viewer always completes the work. It is rather a matter of how much completion seems to be requested; completion can sometimes feel more like construction. And while the compression of contradictory registers into tight cognitive spaces, the negation through ambivalence and equivocation are features that could be said to underwrite a great deal of art (Herbert, 2014: 8).

This is what art critic Martin Herbert calls “the uncertainty principle” which

underlies many contemporary art works. With this term, Herbert signals a shift from the supportive to the constitutive, as the certainty with which a work is made and received is to a great extent lost. This loss of structure offers not only a mental stretch, but also seems to pair with physical freedom for movement. A true body-brain achievement can be inspired by wandering along a photographic work (Mark Hansen, in *Westgeest* 2011: 143). Postcards, colour laser prints and virtual photo-scapes construct relations for the viewer to grab, touch, press, and stray from. While systematically moving is almost customary for processing an art work, it does not seem to satisfy the restlessness we feel when experiencing new photo installations. We need to reorganize our senses and feelings, looking for meaning while doing so. The act of walking in itself may stand for a longing for something the body has lost (Younis, 2012: 4).

#### V. Conclusion: Accidental photography

In conclusion, this article leads us to accept that, rather than having an artist in control, the photographic object expresses itself. The contemporary potential of photography is stretched before, during and after the image processing, ultimately constructing freedom for movement for the maker and the viewer. Photography is increasingly (mis)understood by artists from outside of the field of photography, who explore photography on a micro-materialistic level and, as such, work beyond the conventional format through awareness of light, dimension and density of the photographic image today. By embracing the accidental, the glitch expands the working domain of photography from the inside out. The case-study artists Katharina Gaenssler and Rosa Menkman provide photography with a materialized zeitgeist that holds distraction as method and wandering as tool. The 21<sup>st</sup> century photo installations cause a dizziness of freedom. They do not produce traditional photographs that contain isolated space and linear time, but an evolving space where flickering perspectives and moments are accessible simultaneously. It is artists like the two who challenge the current complexity conveyed by the medium. A rhetorical fear of what is outside the picture frame can now be replaced by an introspective view with endless possibilities.

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