

*Peter P. Goché*

# **SURFACEWORKS “OUT THERE” IN HERE: SURFACE TENSION AND SPATIAL APPARATUS**

# 03

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## ABSTRACT

*Black Contemporary is an experiential archive whereby ongoing investigations are conducted in an effort to expand knowledge specific to the study of atmospheric logics and the Midwestern agricultural landscape. The archive is located two miles south of Ames, Iowa. Using experiential perceptions as spatial conditioners, current studio projects focus on the act of making and curating a series of Surface Works within a dormant seed-drying facility constructed in 1979. Based on a series of modulated experimental actions, the foundational body of work provides a material/visual reflection on the contemporary social configuration of the post-industrial landscape of Iowa. This work might best be understood as a peculiar deposit of site-adjusted installations and experimental drawings that indicate the presence of, and makes clearly recognizable, its context as referent, rather than as a source or setting. Each work is driven by the nascent possibility of a persistent desire to intercourse with existing material surroundings pursuant to a philosophical position that leverages perceptual notions of chiaroscuro in the practice of understanding and generating a set of spatial valence within the material culture of a post-industrial site. Surface Works addresses the aesthetic experience generated by a set of spatial apparatus (installation and experimental drawing) with a relative capacity to draw out, unite, react or interact with the latent dimensions of our inherited landscape.*

## BIOGRAPHY

*Peter P. Goché is a practicing architect, artist and educator. He is co-investigator/author of Guidelines for Spatial Regeneration in Iowa, funded by the 2007 AIA Board of Knowledge Committee. Goché has exhibited and lectured on his creative practice and scholarship throughout North America and Western Europe. Goché holds both B. Arch and M. Arch degrees in architectural studies from Iowa State University. He taught in the Department of Art at Drake University before joining the faculty at the Iowa State University, where he coordinates and teaches design studios.*

*Goché is also the founder and executive curator of Black Contemporary, a rural field station dedicated to the study of spatial phenomena and perception. Using site-adjusted installations as his primary mode of practice, Goché deploys an integrated and focused approach to both theoretical and practical questions pertaining to the nature and impact of materiality specific to the re-occupation of post-industrial spaces. Each inquiry utilizes a range of domains including art, architecture and anthropology as a means of exploring not only what material cultivations can be, but also what they, in fact, do.*

Peter P. Goché

# SURFACEWORKS “OUT THERE” IN HERE: SURFACE TENSION AND SPATIAL APPARATUS

## PREFACE: SHADOWS

As a silhouette, the shadow of memory stands in sharp contrast to its background. As the sun passes overhead, the shadow’s distinct form creeps over ground. And now, in the late afternoon, our experience is revealed to us, no longer a shadow. We depart the day wondering about the circumstances that calendar such events. And so, too, we speculate on its connection to ancient ritual—to night.

Raised out on the open, flat planes of north-eastern Iowa, I was privy to a wonderful, single-point perspective from which to cultivate my intense curiosity of self with respect to the earth’s surface.

And now, with calm economy, I await the ghost hour. In this still moment, I am present. Descending from flesh and bone, a mark (*nota/maculā*) appears. Each mark is humble...almost silent. Inebriated, I study the mark’s nuances, and am reminded of the tracings of my childhood, made while playing in the dirt (*humus*).<sup>1</sup>

## PROLOGUE: LABOUR

Using experimental drawing and site-adjusted installations as my primary modes of practice, I deploy an integrated and focused approach to both theoretical and practical questions pertaining to the nature and impact of materiality, specific to the re-occupation of post-industrial spaces. Oscillating between processes invoking the labour involved in working the land (ground) and the

making of *surfaceworks*, I conduct a material practice that opposes the objective distance typically associated with research by producing a series of works with a relative capacity to unite or react to or interact with an inherited landscape. My works provoke a temporal-spatial encounter that reconciles the simultaneous and complex nature of a rural configuration that often yields a duality of being “out there” or of being in here. Each inquiry utilizes my experience of growing up on a subsistence farm and employs a corresponding range of domains including art, architecture and anthropology as a means of exploring what material cultivations can be and do. Based on a series of experimental actions (material modalities), each assemblage is driven by the nascent possibility of a persistent desire to intercourse with existing material surroundings and labour constructs. Each work begins with the disposition of light and dark pursuant to a philosophical position that leverages perceptual notions of *chiaroscuro*—a logic first used in the 1680s by Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio. The literal meaning of *chiaroscuro* is “bright-dark” and stems from Italian *chiaro* (from Latin *clarus*, clear) + *oscuro* (from Latin *obscurus*, obscure). By extension, the conscious and unconscious, the seen and the unseen, focus and open awareness and the made re-made become factors in the realm of understanding and producing atmospheres. It is a full-scale, three-dimensional methodology, concurrent with exploratory drawing, photography and videography that seeks to express the affects (immaterial harmonics) found latent in our post-industrial landscape.



01:  
*Surfacework 01: Field Notes (beneath the obscurity of light).*



02:  
*Surfacework 02: Spatial Apparatus.*

## INTRODUCTION: BLACK CONTEMPORARY

*Black Contemporary* is a field station located at Black's Seed Farm (26107 530th Ave.) three kilometres south of Ames, Iowa. It serves as laboratory for ongoing investigations intended to expand our experience of knowledge specific to the study of spatial phenomena. Using perception as a spatial conditioner, current studio projects focus on the act of making and curating a series of surface-works within a dormant seed-drying facility constructed in 1979. I will introduce two of these investigations here under the guise of *surfaceworks*.

These works produce ways of knowing. I am referring to a knowing that seeks to describe the underlying, essential qualities of human experience and the context in which that experience happens. These works are therefore inquiries, inquiries in which the cultural history and perceptual nature of a particular setting is revealed. The resultant works yield, what Grant Wood depicts in his 1934 mural *When Tillage Begins Other Arts Follow*: the foundation for subsequent forms of human civilization specific to labour and an intensely modulated means of production. The cumulative effort might indicate the potential use of this facility, and all of Iowa's derelict agricultural facilities, as a laboratory inasmuch as it offers opportunities for a rigorous set of observations, practices and experimentation.

Within the facility are a set of windowless drying bins (silos) and corresponding plenum with associated hopper doors, with which warm air was distributed and regulated. Each silo is a space that served as condenser whereby thousands of acres of corn were compressed into several cubic metres of air. Iowa consists of a broad range of such systems and approaches for mediating landscape that have been rigorously adjusted over decades and thus seem integral to that landscape; in post-industrial Iowa these are often misunderstood as spaces of absence. Developing an understanding of these particular rural configurations demands starting from the compressed point afforded by instruments akin to the silo, a position within from which one is allowed to perceive the consequent world beyond, for any (uncertain, indeterminate) duration. Each redundant silo serves as site for the following *surfaceworks*. Each work, each inquiry, is part of a process by which the perceptual experience of being "in here" while being "out there" is revealed.

## SURFACEWORK 01: SURFACE TENSION/FIELD NOTES

The first type of *surfacework* is a set of drawings which I refer to as *Field Notes*—a material compilation of mental mutterings from which prolonged labour and longing speak. When anthropologists undertake a study of an unfamiliar culture, they typically write an ethnography. Ethnographic writing is a process referred to by Clifford Geertz as 'writing culture.'<sup>2</sup> Its implementation depends on writing field notes; an essential occasion in which the researcher creates jottings (brief texts) based on first-hand (lived) experience while living amongst the study group. *Field Notes*, is an alternative approach to written jottings; I use methodologies related to drawing and casting to achieve a more subjective understanding of a people and their rituals of labour and food production. The purpose of this work is to evoke a view of the world in which cultural alternatives can be situated alongside one another in the realm of our collective imagination. These begin to indicate something not yet apparent. They, in part, are a biographical recall of ordinary occurrences surrounding the family farm unit. However, like that of Anselm Kiefer's layers of multiple histories and media,<sup>3</sup> or Gerhard Richter's *Elbe* series and its inherent knowing as a matter of making,<sup>4</sup> *Field Notes* is neither planned nor conceived but is a speculative source of enlightenment achieved through making and re-making surface and substrate.

This emerging body of work, developed within the adjoining drying bins of a defunct seed-drying facility, involves working petroleum ink across veneered plywood and assembling found farm detritus on top. Each work is evidence of the labour of working land, what is left behind, what is absorbed and what is furrowed by these gestures. It is part of a collection of socio-cultural observations that employs lithography ink and labour's leftovers—wind worn debris (burlap sack, spent tire and galvanized metal ladder) on large (1.2m by 2.4m) sheets of maple veneered plywood and building felt. The subsequent surface of ink is placed under tension from imbalanced forces at the liquid-air interface and the corresponding debris field. Thus, *Field Notes* is a 1:1 register of the ground out there, a re-enactment or embodiment of the processes of mental and physical exertion involved in working the land (ground). Each surface operates as a drawing through which we might perceive both ground and labour. This series of works makes visible (spatiality, surface and substrate) what time tends to obscure or obliterate.



03&04:  
*Field Notes. Surfacework 01 in the space of the silo.*



05:  
*Field Notes: Labour's Leftovers.*

06:  
*Field Notes: Labour may not progress linearly.*

## SURFACEWORK 02: SPATIAL APPARATUS/THE MAP

When the world of clear and articulate objects is abolished, our perceptual being, cut off from its world, evolves a spatiality without images. This is what happens in the night. Night is not an object for me; it enwraps me and infiltrates through all my senses. I am no longer withdrawn into my perceptual look-out from which I watch the outlines of objects moving by at a distance. Night has no outlines; it is itself in contact with me...<sup>5</sup>

When thinking about labour and being I am drawn to the logic of Merleau-Ponty and specifically his central thesis in which he refers to the “primacy of perception,” whereby we perceive the world through our bodies; we are embodied subjects. In the field of design, where realization seems to derive direction from utility before addressing obligations arising from the world of aesthetics, the *surfaceworks* (both in-the-making and as-made) provide an intercession during which revelations as to what constitutes being may be formed. In this engagement, we enter into a dialogue with the humanity of place—an intercourse with time, deep time—and thus, we are immersed in the visual and perceptual challenges of an inherited landscape and its cultural educement.

The dimensional nature of Iowa’s agricultural landscape is not immediately discernible. Physically this can be attributed to the absence of outlines, to a paucity of objects seen against the line at which the sky and earth appear to meet. Culturally, this is likely attributable to the intrinsic relationship (both symbolic and ethical) between the family farm unit and the expansive ground plane on which it operates. The landscape, therefore, is an extent, both physically and culturally, that becomes present and knowable (only) through the first-person, an experiential unit of measure commonly referred to as time. This landscape makes architecture (the silo, the plenum, the farm) by conflating realities, geographies and topographies. It folds contingent constructs and agencies. It maps its guest to specific geographic, historical and personal conditions. This architecture, therefore, offers surveys of (and the means of surveying) realms of landscape that are yet to be understood. Like a map, the landscape ‘constructs’, architecture measures:

The map does not reproduce the real but constructs one, it connects, it is open, multiple and reworkable. The map, that is, is never a finished product but remains a multiple open work, which inevitably refers

to something that is both internal and external to it—a referent that is not represented but produced.<sup>6</sup>

This is the second form of *surfacework*. Commonly referred to as ‘installation art’, this second *surfacework*, *The Map*, began by reconsidering the nature of an internal space within the seed dryer (formerly referred to as the plenum). *The Map* is a site-adjusted installation, an experimental terrain. Within the seed dryer is a new type of envelope that consists of sheet lead harvested from a 1924 printing warehouse in Des Moines, Iowa (*The Map* re-situates material from another post-industrial site to this one). Originally a shower liner, the heavy metal has been suspended within the entrance hall sharing proximity with the concrete slab on grade. The varied deformation of its topographic surface is incident with the southern light, which creeps in over the course of the day. This surface consists of two halves, bisected to enable removal from its original host space, that have been re-joined and overlapped. It no longer is a single continuum but rather a multi-layered terrain of otherness similar to the landscape ‘out there.’ As such it locates and relocates the viewer. It unfolds a history and re-frames the dimension of being within and outside equally. It is mistaken, misunderstood and misaligned.

## EMBODIED SUBJECTS

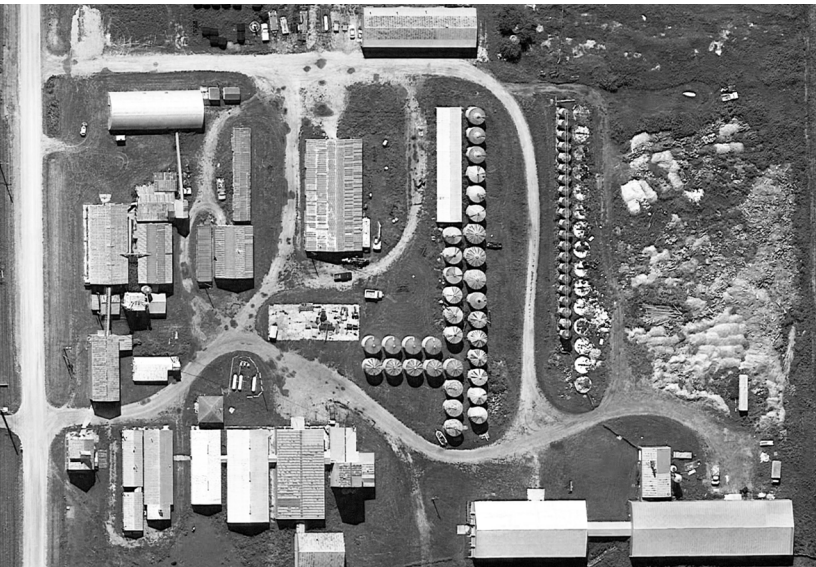
Under this polyvalent methodology, the *surfaceworks*—or, more broadly, ambient configurations—are not what occupies the silo, but rather are what is completely enveloped by the limited daylight and surrounding darkness marked out and brought into relief by the silo. In other words, the restricted view of the situation associated with the silo yields what James Corner refers to as an eidetic operation whereby the occupant forges their own unusually vivid image of a working community—a landscape as an occupied milieu, the effects and significance of which accrue through use and engagement over time.<sup>7</sup> In this way, the perceptual experience of the work forges a return to solitary, contemplative experience and induces an ontological awareness with respect to what is known, consciously and subconsciously, regarding farm culture and the inherited landscape.

To this end, the act of reconstructing our engagement with forgotten spaces assists in cultivating *surfacework* as a practice of making and thinking. It is a subconscious



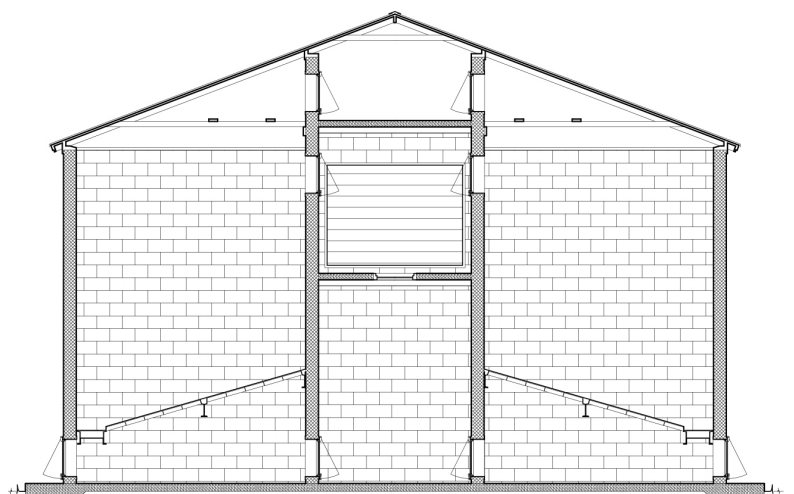


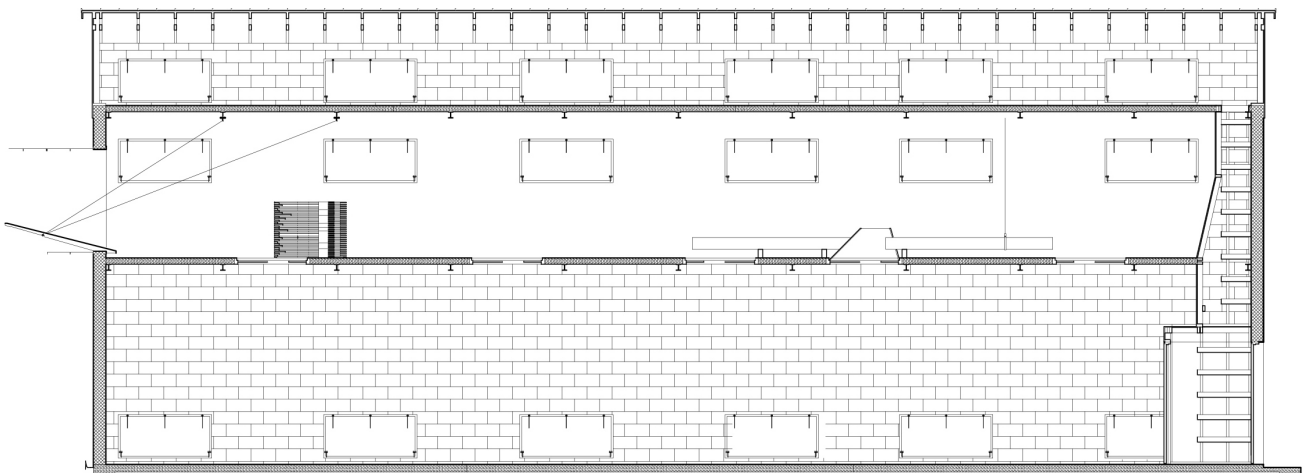
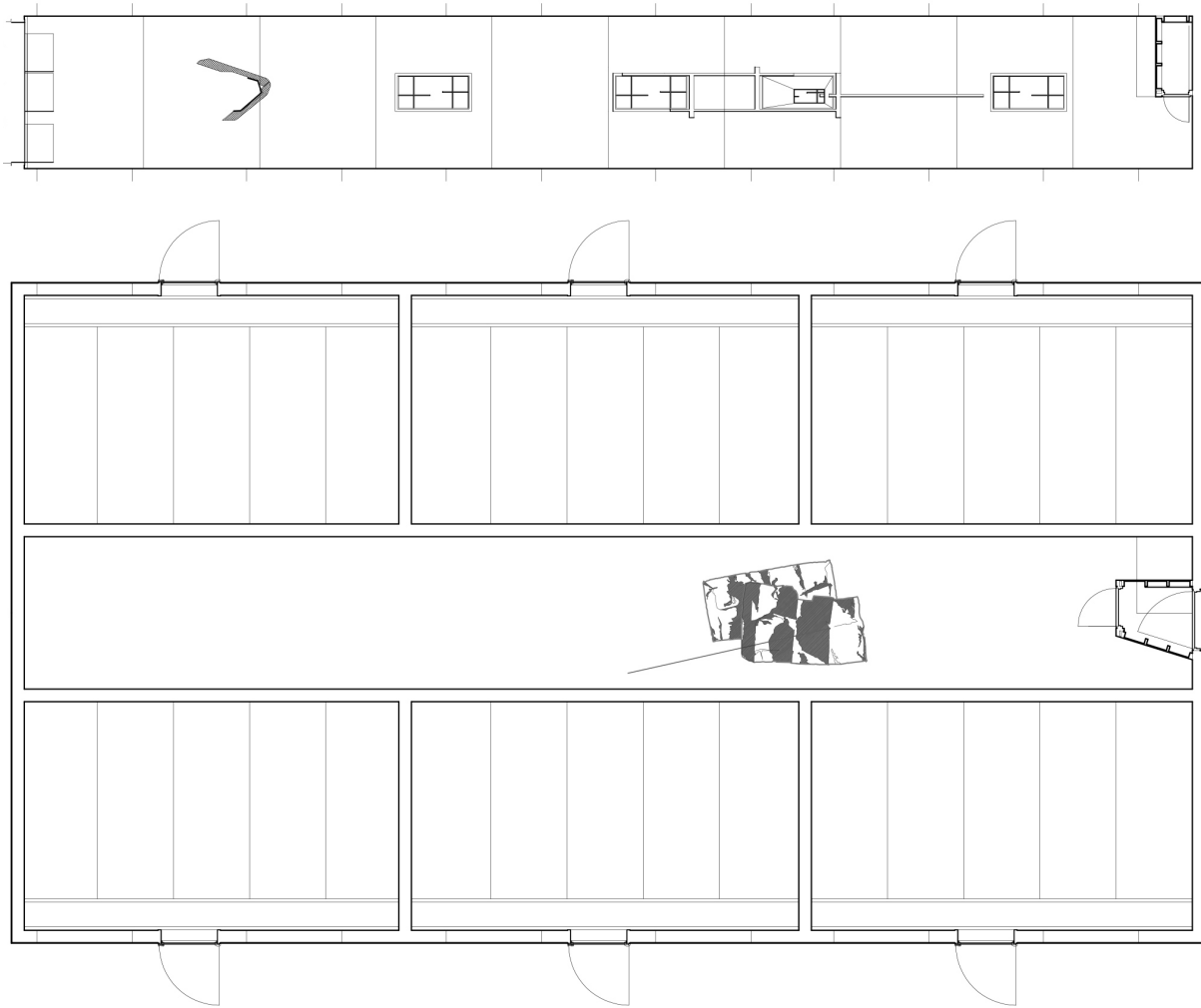
07:  
*Spatial Apparatus Drawn.*



08:  
Aerial photograph of *Black Contemporary*.

09:  
Defunct seed-drying facility south of Ames, Iowa.





10:  
Spatial Apparatus in the space of the plenum.



11:  
*Spatial Apparatus.*

engagement whereby rather than distancing ourselves from the world in order to achieve a consciousness of the world, we become immersed in the world. It is an embodiment of *chiaroscuro*: a pictorial practice of arranging light (the conscious) and shadow (the subconscious) to reveal the smooth emptiness of fragmented time, and thereby, mine its capacity to summon the subconscious and reoccupy the land “out there” as a dimension of life entwined with being “in here,” a part of our ongoing perceptual experience. We, now embodied subjects, are confronted with the soft lustre of an inactive landscape and its consequent expansive austerity.

ground surrounding Black Contemporary (geographical coordinates: 41°98', 93°64'). A constant banging reverberates throughout as the wind pries at the sloughing metal skin of its neighbouring confines. The pain of hunger and longing grow distant. There is a heaviness to these sensations that drowns the flesh and bone in the physicality of its surroundings. With prolonged periods of such ordinary madness, the conscience drifts. The wind lulls and we are gone from our desire for reciprocal love and meaningful labour. Imagination and self-esteem give way and tumble along the earth's surface.

## EPILOGUE

Imbricated in the weft of labour and survival, each *surfacework* implicates the occupant in a criterion of atmospheric experience situated between host confine and guest subject. As our perceptual being sifts through the milieu of surface and componentry in the dimensionless distance between host and construct, we might recall the blue cup to which Gernot Böhme refers:

This colour is something which the cup “has.” In addition to its blueness we can ask whether such a cup exists. Its existence is then determined through localization in space and time. The blueness of the cup, however, can be thought of in quite another way, namely as the way, or better, a way, in which the cup is then thought of not as something which is restricted in some way to the cup and adheres to it, but on the contrary as something which radiates out to the environment of the cup, colouring or “tincturing” in a certain way this environment, as Jakob Böhme would say. In this way, the thing is not thought of in terms of its difference from other things, its separation and unity, but in the ways in which it goes forth from itself... It should not cause difficulty to think of colours, smells, and how a thing is tuned as ecstasies.<sup>8</sup>

We submit—laying down our perceptual being before the oncoming blueness of the post-industrial freight train and are extinguished. An audible latency (out there) moves in (here).

Standing naked, we embody the cold, concrete darkness of the past with a relative capacity to unite or react or interact with the soft lustre of an inherited landscape. A perpetual wind shifts and howls through the open

## NOTES

- 1 This passage is an edited version of a passage recited during a performance/installation (entitled *Vault*) at Woodland Cemetery, Des Moines, Iowa, by the author in 2007, as an accompaniment to Sergei Rachmaninoff's (1915) *Vocalise I*. See Goché, Peter P. (2016) 'Staging: Making a Scene' in Feurstein, Marcia and Gray Read (eds). 2016 (2013). *Architecture as a Performing Art*. London & New York: Routledge.
- 2 Clifford, James and George E. Marcus (eds.). 1986. *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*. Berkeley, CA & London: University of California Press, p.73.
- 3 Anselm Kiefer, *Exodus*, 1985 (lead and shellac on charred photographic paper on board), Des Moines Art Center, Iowa.
- 4 Gerhard Richter, *Elbe Series*, 1957, (series of 31 ink jet on paper mono-prints). See <<https://www.gerhard-richter.com/en/art/microsites/elbe>> (accessed 31st October, 2017)
- 5 Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. 1978. *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith. London & New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, p.283.
- 6 Stoppani, Teresa. 2004. 'Mapping: the locus of the project' in *Angelaki Journal of Theoretical Humanities*, Vol. 9, No. 2, p.186.
- 7 Corner, James. 1998. 'Operational Eidetics: Forging New Landscapes' in *Harvard Design Magazine* (Fall 1998), p.24.
- 8 Böhme, Gernot. 1993. 'Atmosphere as the Fundamental Concept of a New Aesthetic' in *Thesis Eleven*, No. 36, p.121.

## FIGURES

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