

Liquified Images, Solidified Time

Johanna Jaeger's exhibition "clouds & pebbles" in the Drawing Room, Hamburg

An experience of time as something flexible, even fluid, has always been linked in a special way to the medium of (analogue) photography. Whether in the long exposure times of early daguerreotypes, whose protagonists gaze at us so fixedly, in the serial photography by Eadweard Muybridge, who first caught temporal progress in images during the 19th century, in the proverbial "decisive moment" when the shutter release is pressed, sought after by Henri Cartier-Bresson, or whether in the Polaroid photo, also known as the "instant picture", which turned the developing process into an exciting experience of time from the 1970s onwards: In one way or another, a particular approach to handling time always flows into the photographic medium and shapes the representational character of its images. Johanna Jaeger makes this immanent relationship between photography and time into a conceptual and motivic theme in her work. She develops her images along photography's core characteristic of being a reproductive temporal medium. To this end, she has developed a characteristic pictorial language that revolves around fluid ephemera such as clouds, colour gradients, and the processual dissolution of form; all this ties in with phenomena of light and exposure and also addresses the sedimentation of the solid as a photographic metaphor. In addition, she focuses on compositional factors that can be interpreted as genuinely photographic processes, such as exposure, development, trace, positive/negative, and so on. In Jaeger's pictorial creations, the subsequent media-related reflection is never merely analytical, but develops immediate poetic traits.

In "*clouds & pebbles*", her first solo exhibition in the Drawing Room, Hamburg, Jaeger constructs a frame with the two installation works, *sky piece* and *river pebble (horizontal split_1-∞)* (both 2021), thus literally proclaiming the exhibition a "picture space". From this, she unfolds a field of tension for her photographic tableaux. *Sky piece* is a four-by-six-metre UV print on PVC. The image shows a cloudy sky, an atmospheric, momentary formation fixed in the photograph and thus a motif characteristic of Jaeger's work. Fastened to the wall by one corner, the image glides into the room and across a large part of the floor. This walkable cloud

piece enables Jaeger to reverse spatial and perceptual coordinates visually; in *sky piece*, a piece of sky is now literally lying at our feet.¹



In the interplay between *sky piece* and the wall-mounted installation *river pebble...* Jaeger then spans a visual field of disparate temporal structures. For *river pebble...* she had river pebbles she had collected herself cut into halves lengthwise and then embedded the resultant pieces at different positions into the gallery walls. Only the polished cut surfaces are visible, the three-dimensional objects thus appear two-dimensional, pictorial. Their structures are cloudy, and Jaeger interprets this in analogy to the photographic process: as a geological compound whose state was fixed at some distant point in time, a "stone snapshot" so to speak. In the installation, Jaeger has placed the respective halves symmetrically on opposite walls, so that they remain subtly interrelated. An attentive gaze is necessary to recognize the separated halves across the distance of the room and to reconnect them in the imagination.

¹ The artist associates with *sky piece* "the idea that this piece of sky could simply have been pulled in through the window". All quotations in the text have been taken from emails from Johanna Jaeger to the author on 25th October and 4th November 2021.



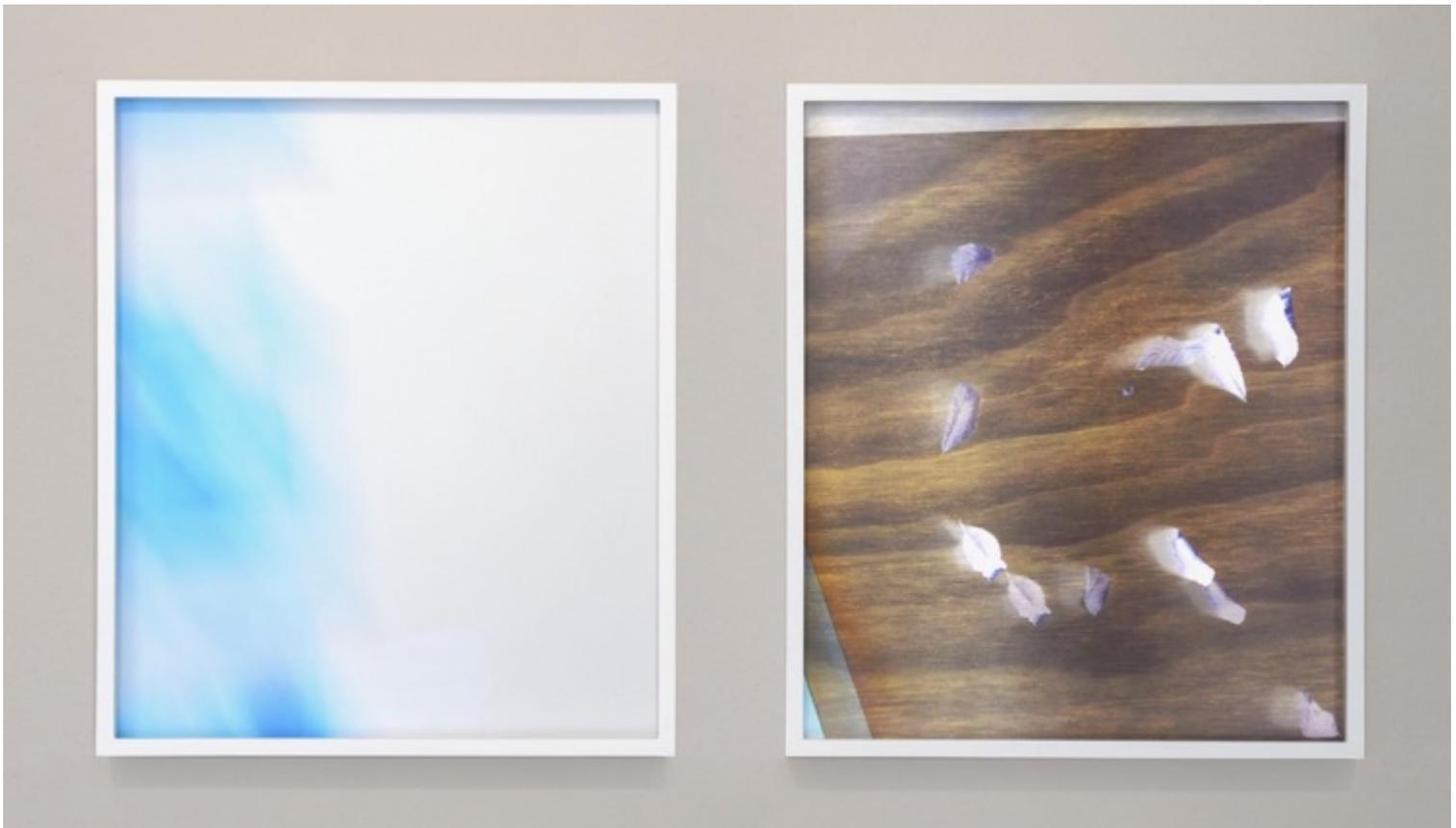
The photo series *clouds & pebbles (making 2 of 1)* (2020) follows on directly from this installation-like setting. In this four-part conceptual still life, Jaeger staggers different pictorial levels: A marbled stone slab and a piece of sky function as space-simulating backgrounds. They are recognizably photographs; here, Jaeger works consciously according to the picture-within-a-picture method. The fact that a polished stone surface forms the sky while a photograph of the cloudy sky forms the ground is obviously a parallel to the reversal of perceptual coordinates in *sky piece* and *river pebble...*. On the cloud motif projecting into the photo from the right, Jaeger has placed two objects that unfold pictorial qualities in their turn: a glass vase filled to the brim with water and a pebble. The shapeless, transparent water produces surprising optical effects in the plastic form of the vase: it is not simply that a small piece of sky appears as a reflection on the surface of the water; not simply that grey marbling and sky blue protrude into each other visually in a narrow intermediate zone; the river pebble placed behind the glass, a parallel to *river pebble...*, also appears visually divided in the centre photos, but can be seen in its entirety in the outer two, once on the left and once on the right. Jaeger photographed this arrangement four times with identical camera settings, changing only the position of the pebble. "The pebble moves back and forth behind the water-filled vase in seemingly logical sequence, like the gaze between images," she writes. Jaeger stages this as a matter of the gaze, which, as in *river pebble...*, she makes the protagonist here, too. In a setting constructed from photographs, Jaeger places objects that, as subjects, in turn create image-forming effects. So, what is the subject of the image, what is the medium that produces the image?

Through such stagings and exaggerations, Jaeger succeeds in interpreting categories of the photographic in a poetic way.



In this sense, the diptych *blue swirl / inverse fall* (2021) combines two different motifs to form a visual-poetic chord. Here, too, it is a matter of diffusion processes and the parallelization of different temporal horizons. While one of the motifs can be deciphered as autumn leaves with an idiosyncratic mismatch of colours (a yellow-blue contrast that appears again and again in her work), the other takes up the sky motifs that characterize *sky view* and *clouds & pebbles*, but apparently carries them further towards abstraction. What may seem at first glance to be a sky, a fine-grained, sometimes blurred expanse of blue with fringes of white, turns out on closer inspection to be the photograph of a colour gradient. In fact, Jaeger is working here with a staged similarity to the sky motif, but introduces a different pictorial process over it. This reveals a parallel with images such as the work group *repeating accidents* (2020), the series *photography & gravity* (2016), or the video *unstill* (2017), in which the artist works with ink gradients spreading diffusely in water.

Jaeger always thinks of photography in terms of implicit processes of materialization, and in this sense *blue swirl* owes its origins to an experimental set-up: Jaeger dissolved blue ink in water in a transparent bowl, and at a certain stage of the spread she photographed the result. In a second run, she placed the photo of the first spread under the bowl and tried to recreate the random pattern that had been produced first for a second time - but even with all her care, this could never be done exactly. She photographed this outcome as well (above the photo of the first); thus, *blue swirl* shows this superimposition, making photographic factors such as time and coloration into a pictorial theme founded on differentiation. The title *inverse fall* echoes the idea of a seasonal motif, and indeed there is such a reference: on a walk, Jaeger came across the bright yellow autumn leaves of the silver poplar, photographed some of the leaves lying on the ground, and transformed their yellow into a strong sky blue via colour inversion. In this context, she created another similar diptych entitled *inverse fall / indistinct* (2021).





The photo *vases without flowers (glass / water / leaf / teststrips)* (2020), with its unusual cropping, striking diagonals, and sparse-kept inventory, is a rather concise, almost abstract-looking still life. In its staging, the image links aspects of photographic representation in yet another way from the works described up to this point. The title suggests the genre of the still life, but immediately links it to something absent, while the parenthesis provides a factual list of the image's components. In fact, the non-existent bouquet is replaced here by the staging of partly photographic material, such as the aforementioned test strips, which run across the image as narrow parallel lines, beginning from the upper left-hand edge in shades of red, orange and brown to yellow. These are classic exposure strips covered with cardboard and exposed from a short to a long period for testing; depending on the exposure conditions, they exhibit a different coloration. Usually, they are at least ten centimetres wide, so Jaeger cut them into narrow strips for this motif. Due to the lens effect of the filled water glass, which fittingly has a narrow gold rim, the ends of the stripes not only appear strangely angled, but also,

because they are seen through the glass as laterally reversed, suddenly end up in a completely different place. The curved orange-brown line at the far right of the glass, for example, is actually the extension of the lower, darkest strip at the far left of the image, with which it has no direct connection. The short piece of yellow to its left, meanwhile, extends the middle line but with a drastic change of direction. The dark brown end to be seen at the far left of the glass does not connect to any of the three lines; this is a laterally-inverted reflection of the elongated leaf on the right. Indeed, this is the only plant element in the orange-brown bouquet. Jaeger has also supplemented the superficially two-dimensional motif with an astute staggering of the picture planes. The leaf to the right of the glass is cropped, although the photograph itself seems to continue. At this point, an ambiguous space of representation is created; at second glance, a fine line and the slight curvature to the right of the actual motif reveal that another narrow print with a pale colour gradient obviously lies above it. On the far right, a brown-red card appears, so that here various backgrounds and carriers move into the picture, thus ingeniously questioning the photograph as a closed illusionary space. *Vases without flowers (glass / water / leaf / teststripes)*, therefore, also contains media references, and although - as always in Jaeger's photography - everything is revealed openly, choreographed irritations of the gaze and deceptions of the eye lead us back again and again to the media-related conditions of the photographic.

Jens Asthoff (Translation: Lucinda Rennison)

Johanna Jaeger
clouds & pebbles

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Opening Hours: Tuesday - Thursday from 12 - 7 pm and by appointment