Excursions

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Writing the World: Photographing the Text of the Landscape

Chair in the woods (*fig.1*)

At the outset, I would like to say that I am a photographer, which at first seems self-evident but as time has gone on I have become more and more aware that my role as a researcher encompasses several practices: writing, thinking and photography. My general enterprise is an investigation into a set of correlating ideas: landscape, text, photography, writing. The tensions between certain oppositions become relevant, such as, viewer/viewed; subject/object; inside/outside; nature/culture, all of which are produced, argues Jacques Derrida, by the non-conceptual neologism, *différance*. It is my contention that photography is a practice of writing, and following Derrida, I argue that it is a general system of difference, it is grammatological rather than representational. Photography is refracted through Derrida's non-concept, enabling us to think of the images it produces in terms of *physis in différance.*

I would like to commence this paper by exploring some of my early visual work that I describe as dialogical. Following on from which, I intend to introduce some ideas about the landscape as text and the impact that this way of thinking has on my project. The resonance between the landscape and the photograph as inscribed surfaces will be briefly considered before moving on to an exploration of Rosalind Krauss' thesis on Surrealist photographic *écriture*. The

notion that the photograph functions as a sign will be investigated, particularly in terms of the disruption of photography's claim to presence its subject. The idea that the (deceased) subject is brought to presence *via* the photograph is articulated by Roland Barthes in his final book *Camera Lucida*. For Barthes, the photographic image cannot be a sign, it is a vehicle through which the subject is made manifest: the photograph is "an emanation of a past reality"[1], "a certificate of presence"[2]. The photographic image facilitates perceptual access to the originary subject, *in itself*. For Barthes, the photograph is necessarily transparent, an empty envelope which would float away were it not for the referent weighing it down.[3] However, conceiving photography as signification facilitates a way of thinking about photographic images as the products of writing, and this offers some resistance to the notion that the photograph is a motif of, what Jacques Derrida calls, the metaphysics of presence. That is, the photograph as writing is sameness in difference rather than a self-identical presencing of the subject.

Barthes' resistance to the notion that the photograph can be a sign is, as I hope to demonstrate in due course, challenged by Rosalind Krauss' ideas about Surrealist photography as *écriture*, which she works through in 'The Photographic Conditions of Surrealism'. Her general point is that the photographic, through its capacity to double and space the referent, is a condition which produces Surrealist *écriture*, or writing. That is, Krauss' argument enables us to think about the photograph as a sign, albeit, following Derrida, a sign which is subject to constant deferral. Indeed, as far as Krauss is concerned, the frame itself functions as a signifier, the frame *signifies signification*. Therefore, we can think about photography as a process of signification, and between the landscape as text and the photograph as a product of writing a space of

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1 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, trans. Richard Howard (London, England: Vintage, 2000), p. 88.

2 Ibid., p. 87.

3 Ibid., p. 5.

intertextuality begins to open.

Being engaged in practice-led research has inevitably forced me to reflect upon the relation between theory and practice. Towards the beginning of the project, my visual practice found a productive mode of engagement when I began to work dialogically between text and image. Writing became part of the visual work and over time the thesis has become the articulation of various practices: I find that the in-between of these practice(s) is a dialogical space.
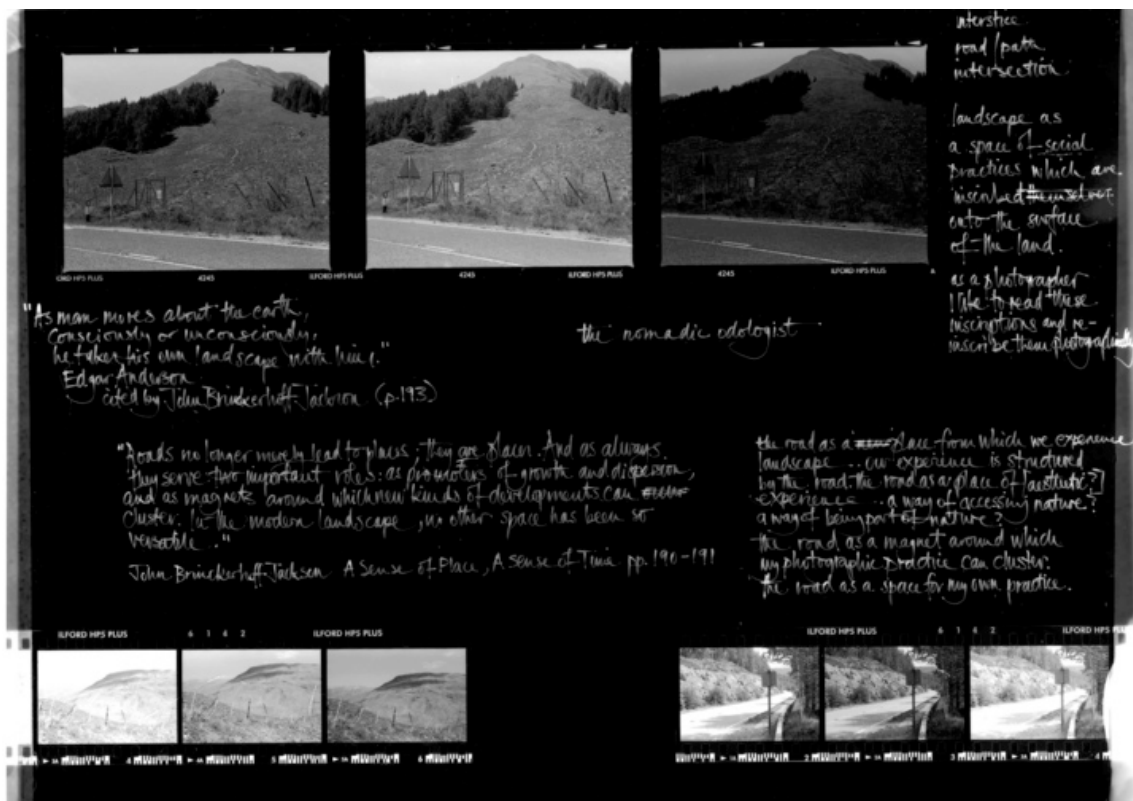
Contact writing: road (*fig.2*)

The contact writings (*fig. 2*) were an investigative mode of practice concerned with the opening of dialogue rather than the production of finished pieces of work. However, this way of working also facilitated certain interactions with the photographic materials. For example, the use of a number of different film formats together which foregrounded the materiality of the

film, thus undermining the assumption that the camera is an analogue for the eye and its recorded image somehow approximates the seen. In the contact writings the photograph asserts the physicality of its own surface through the demonstration of the substratum of the film. The image thus becomes the interaction between multiple photographs and script.

Critically, the traditional wet process photograph comes into being through an interaction between photosensitive materials, light and chemistry. The photographic image is made from a light sensitive surface which is etched or inscribed by light. This conception of the photograph resonates with the understanding of landscape that I have arrived at as a result of earlier research: the landscape is the surface upon which culture inscribes itself, in short, landscape is text. Landscape is the trace of activities such as work, leisure and travel. The analysis of the early etymology of the word landscape by John Brinkerhoff Jackson, amongst others, encourages a far broader understanding of the heritage of the word than its modern etymology suggests. I have found Jackson's conception of landscape as a collection of "synthetic spaces"[4], that is, landscape as culturally actualised, to be a particularly useful catalyst for both thought and visual practice.

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4 John Brinkerhoff Jackson, *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape* (New Haven Conneticut and London, England: Yale University Press, 1984), p. 8.
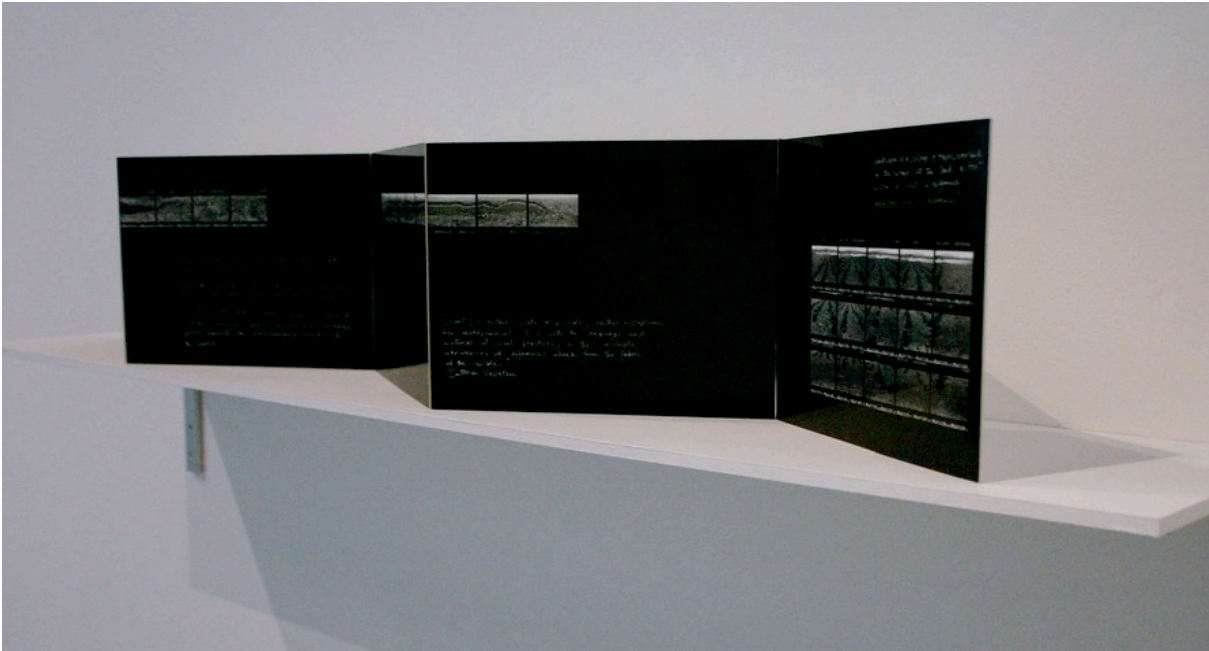
Tosg/Tusk (*fig. 3*)

The cultural actualisation of the Hebridean landscape through the process of peat cutting

has inspired a number of visits to a particular peat bank on North Uist. Each year, the bank

records a changing inscription as the peat face is cut and re-cut. The landscape, culturally

inscribed, is text, but not simply because the surface is physically incised, it is text due to its

mobile nature: the landscape as text does not stop, it is subject to constant change under the tread

of man and the changes effected by light. I think of Roland Barthes' description of his

experiences during a walk in the landscape which he uses as a metaphor for text: "All of these

incidents are half-identifiable; they come from codes which are known but their combination is

unique, founds the stroll in a difference repeatable only as difference".[5] The observer's relation

to the landscape is therefore no longer one of sovereign viewing subject, distanciated from the

viewed object. Rather, the observer is within the landscape, immersed, the experience of being

within the landscape is *repeatable only as difference*. It becomes relevant to think of this

observer in the text of the landscape as a reader.

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5 Roland Barthes, 'From Work to Text', in *Art in Theory 1900-1990*, eds. Harrison and Wood (Oxford, England: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), pp. 943-944.
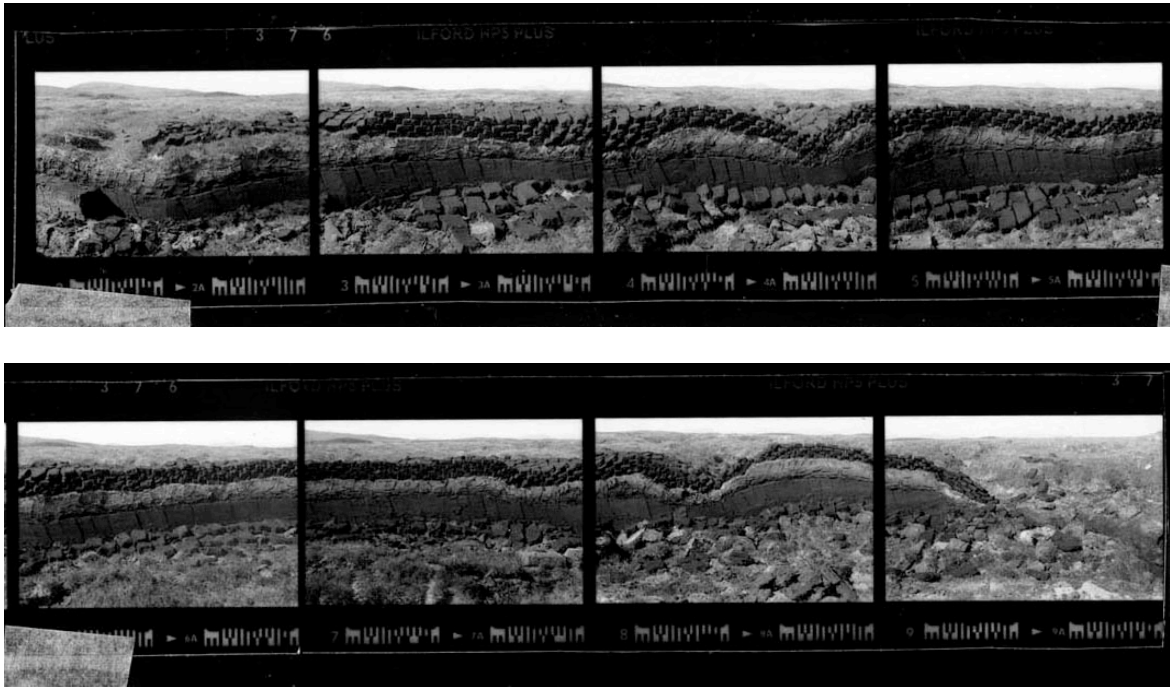
Tosg/Tusk detail of work in progress (*fig.4*)

So, initially I came to think of the photograph as an inscribed surface, by way of a challenge to the ocular metaphor of photography but also as a kind of analogue to the surfaces in the world which intrigued me: landtexts, textural, textual landscapes. However, to argue that photography *writes* the world we must demonstrate much more than its physical inscriptive character. As I hope to show in a moment, the practice of photography is one of elision and spacing and this facilitates its articulation as a practice of writing. The opening and closing of the shutter inserts a temporal and physical break between the subject and its image and if, contrary to what Barthes writes in *Camera Lucida*, we are to argue that the photograph is a sign, this space between the signified and the signifier destabilises photography's claim to presence the subject: between frame and world, shutter and subject, there is a hiatus; an in-between. In the words of Krauss, this spacing "invaginates"[6] photography's illusion of presence.

In her essay entitled 'The Photographic Conditions of Surrealism,' Krauss takes her cue

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6 Rosalind Krauss, *The Originality of the Avante-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: MIT Press, 1986), p. 106.

from Jacques Derrida when she writes that the spaces between the signified and the signifier, "are the formal preconditions of the sign"[7]. Whilst so called Surrealist photography is not a central concern of mine, I believe that the manner in which Krauss theorises both Dada photomontage and Surrealist photography is significant for photography in general insofar as firstly, it enables us to think about photographs as signs and secondly, opens a dialogue on photography as writing. Her distinction between Dada photomontage as an interpretation of the real and Surrealist photography's paradoxical practice of constituting reality as a sign, that is, nature as representation, or presence transformed into writing, is also of critical importance in terms of my broader thesis regarding landscape as text.

According to Krauss, the Surrealist photographers drove a space between the image and its referent. They achieved this by way of doubling: the use of sandwiched negatives and double printing. By using overlay they inserted another space into the so-called seamless space of photographic realism, which appears unsettling due to the manifestation of the double. But Krauss also contends that this doubling has the effect of undermining the reality of the original. She writes:

> It is doubling that produces the formal rhythm of spacing –
> the two-step that banishes the unitary condition of the moment,
> that creates within the moment an experience of fission. For
> it is doubling that elicits the notion that to an original has been
> added its copy. The double is the simulacrum, the second, the
> representative of the original. It comes after the first, and in this
> following, it can only exist as figure or image. But in being
> seen in conjunction with the original, the double destroys the

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7 Ibid., p. 107.

pure singularity of the first.[8]

The addition of the double thus ruptures the unity of the photographic moment, and according to Krauss, it is this doubling which distinguishes Surrealist photography from its Dada predecessor, photomontage. However, in both forms of photography, breaks are introduced into the legible reality of the photograph. This, argues Krauss, forces the image to be read as a sign rather than as a singular presence.

> [T]he photographic image, thus "spaced," is deprived of one
>
> of the most powerful of photography's many illusions. It is
>
> robbed of a sense of presence.[9]

Krauss asserts that this spacing is a crucial aspect of Surrealist photographic practice: the photographic condition of Surrealism in general turns upon the medium of photography's capacity, through spacing and doubling, to constitute reality as a sign. As a result of the re-inscription of the photographic index as a sign of reality a paradox ensues, unsettling and *sur-real*: the surrealist photograph is a proxy for unconscious reality, the undisclosed real. Photography's distension of reality entails that surrealist photographs are more than simply physical inscriptions. As far as Krauss is concerned, these images aspire to the condition of signs due to their ability to cleave reality. The consequence of this fissure in the real is that the *syntagm*, or surface structure of the photograph cannot be perceived as a seamless surface, that is to say, a natural analogue, rather it is a surface composed of units, gaps and repetitions. Thus the surrealist image, argues Krauss, has its own syntax.

However, it is not just the use of double printing and overlay which doubles and spaces the photographic sign. The hiatus between image and world is *produced* by the shutter. Indeed, Krauss herself writes, in a later essay about the sculptor Rachel Whiteread, that "Photography's

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8 Ibid., p. 109.

9 Ibid., p. 107.

'this-has-been'…along with the instantaneous open-and-closing of the shutter, produces the spacing, or the oppositional structure of a paradigm".[10] Thus both the shutter and the frame space the subject and its image. The world photographed is sliced into segments and rearranged: photographs are paradigmatically opposed, that is, they are copied from the world and laid out *side by side*.

Caledonian MacBrayne: Hebrides – Uig to Lochmaddy (Starboard) (*fig.5*)

Before I began to make 'grid' images such as Caledonian MacBrayne: Hebrides – Uig to Lochmaddy (Starboard) (*fig.5*), I had been reading about the blind field[11] in *Camera Lucida*. I was interested in the exclusions of the view, the presence of the frame hinting at that which lies outside of it. I therefore decided to make some images of the landscape which were comprised of more than one photograph. These images have been made by scanning the landscape with the

10 Rosalind Krauss, 'X Marks the Spot' in *Rachel Whiteread: Shedding Life*, ed. Fiona Bradley (London, England : Tate Gallery Publishing, 1996), p. 77.

11 Barthes, *Camera Lucida,* pp. 55-59.

camera and building the view from fragments. Whilst Barthes argues that the *punctum* articulates the blind field thus keeping the subject alive in the photograph, the grid images depicted here make apparent the selective nature of photography: they double, fracture and insert spaces into the view. For example, the previous image (*fig. 5*) was made on board a ferry to the Western Isles: I had been ruminating about the way that travel structures the view. Indeed, when things are moving in front of the camera, spatial incongruities occur and this further emphasises the notion of the play in and between the frames. After I made this image I was fascinated by the loss of the lower half of the man's body, the gap which opens up.

It became clear fairly early on that I should not work with a tripod when making these fractured images because visually coherent pictures would run counter to my ideas regarding the dissemination of the view. Therefore, it was significant that there was something quite awkward and random about the construction of these photographs. What is particularly important is that the image is assembled within the camera rather than being ordered post-production i.e. by collage, as in the photographic works of David Hockney. It is rewarding to find that I am not in control of the view, it seems to rewrite itself. There is a deliberate authorial blindness to the process by which the view is laid out, in a succession of images, side by side. The view of landscape, to borrow Krauss' words about Surrealist photography, is "a rupture that issues into sequence"[12] which coheres around a space which is literally devoid of any information: the frames are absences, which are only disclosed as empty presences in the prints i.e. black. As a signifier of signification, the frame disrupts photography's pretension to presence the world, the illusion that the photograph allows us to access the world transparently through its images is made plain. The surrogacy of the photographic view is a fiction: the frame signifies the world written.

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12 Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths,* p. 115.

Lossiemouth harbour (*fig. 6*)

However, the grid images do remind us that our eyes are always moving, that we build

our perceptions from sense data and memories. Relative positions are therefore significant;

space is rendered less legibly, less comfortably, with doublings and incongruities. The image

registers the small changes in position: the relational nature of the landscape and reader is

emphasised. Although the double is not introduced into a single frame as Krauss describes in the

Surrealist photographs she looks at, her thesis has been instrumental for me in terms of arriving

at an understanding of the importance of the double as an articulator of difference in my own

visual practice. However, it is pertinent to note that the images that I have made are not simply

illustrations of Krauss' theory.

The notion of illustrating or visualising theory is problematic if it is taken to mean that the

theory is primary and the practice which visualises it, secondary: a representational practice.

Indeed, theorising the visual also poses a difficulty if the theory is taken to be a totalising view of

practice. However, I would argue that I am engaged in a conversation between theory and

practice: a dialogue. If we pay attention to Derrida's deconstruction of binary oppositions, we could argue that theory and practice are each the difference of the other, each one in *différance*: practice differed differing theory, theory differed differing practice.[13]

Whilst Krauss' thesis has much to commend it, such as the recognition of the photograph as a sign and the idea that photographic images have their own syntax, her differentiation between Surrealist photography and other *kinds* of photography is questionable. She ascribes the use of extreme close up and framing as particular to Surrealist photography. By framing and therefore making visible, she argues, the camera discloses the automatic writing of the world. However, it is my contention that these are not distinctive Surrealist practices because photography in general is a practice of framing, viewpoint and spacing. The decision to photograph something, even in a commonplace practice of photography, is as much concerned with elision as inclusion and the frame is the structure which demarcates this. As Krauss herself argues, the frame is a form of insistence upon the gap between reality and its sign. She writes:

> The frame announces that between the part of reality that
>
> Was cut away and this part there is a difference; and that
>
> this segment which the frame frames is an example of nature-
>
> as-representation, nature-as-sign. As it signals that experience
>
> of reality the camera frame also controls it, configures it.[14]

Therefore, Krauss does not effectively argue the point that Surrealist photography is distinctive. However, I believe her argument demonstrates that it was the practices of these photographers which make explicit those aspects of photography which are in fact implicit and suppressed by the transparency thesis. Indeed, we could use Krauss' own words on surrealist

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13 See Jacques Derrida, 'Différance', in Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena, and other essays on Husserl's theory of signs*, trans. David B. Allison (Evanston: North Western University Press, 1976), pp. 148-149.

14 Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, p. 115.

photography to describe, what I consider to be broadly common to photography: the

photographic frame itself is "an integer in the calculus of meaning: a signifier of signification."[15]

Eriskay (*fig. 7*)

The frame signifies signification, it differences the image from the world and the explicit

use of the frame as a visual device reminds us that we are looking at photographs rather than

fragments of reality. The image made by the camera is a controlled photographic configuration

of reality: it is reality *re*-written.

However, we might argue that in terms of photographing the landscape, the frame is

double-edged because it absolutely and silently ratifies the choices that the photographer makes.

For all the opacity of the photograph, the frame signals and defines the parameters of the view.

And this almost reasserts the sovereignty of the viewer/view dyad which my thesis of

photography as writing tries to escape. The view, deconstructed and then reconstructed from

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15 Ibid., p.115.

fragments of time, is re-collected to form a new view, a synthetic space: the very persuasiveness of the view made evident by its *automatic* re-writing.

Blackhills, Moray (*fig.8*)

If we are to think about these images in terms of landtext which is re-written photographically, the reassembled view risks the tacit *re*centering of the viewer. In attempting to deconstruct the view, it is important to heed Derrida's reminder that deconstruction is not simply a case of jumping abruptly from one system of thought to another, a sudden overturning of, in this case, the ocularcentrism of the view.

> Derrida insists that deconstruction is a process of 'displacement'
>
> endlessly at work…rather than as an act of critical intervention
>
> that would come, so to speak, *from outside* and simply apply the
>
> standard technique for reversing some 'logocentric' order of priorities.
>
> The activity in question is, he writes, 'more subtle and patient,

more discreet and efficient'.[16]

Thus the 'grid' images do not dispense with the view entirely. Indeed, they demonstrate Derrida's conception that a characteristic of deconstruction is that it is continuously at work. Whilst the view, or rather the ocular metaphor of photography, is being deconstructed it is already in the process of reconstruction. Thus deconstruction is the constant 'displacement' of view and non-view, the oscillation from the one to the other. Derrida states that a

> condition of deconstruction may be at work – part of the
>
> system to be deconstructed already at work not at the centre
>
> but in an eccentric centre – participating in the construction
>
> of what it threatens to deconstruct.[17]

If we take these photographs of the view to be texts, we can argue that the world is not represented by photographic practice. In accordance with Derrida's claim that there is nothing outside of the text, the photograph is the text of a text. Indeed, if there is nothing i.e. no referent or originary presence to which the text can *transparently* refer, all we have are layers of texts each referring to another in a constant chain of signification. The Barthesean Photograph simply cannot presence its subject: the treasury of rays is a fictive emanation, a product of grammatology. As Niall Lucy puts it: "Purity and presence are grammatological effects, effects of a general writing. There is nothing outside this general writing and inside it nothing that is pure and full of presence".[18]

However, we should not assume that Derrida asserts that there is no such thing as reality or that the text is unable to refer to anything outside of itself. Rather, he argues that language itself has a history in which a range of preconceptions are ingrained. One cannot simply overturn

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16 Christopher Norris, *Derrida* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1987), p. 56.

17 Jacques Derrida interviewed in *Derrida*, Dir. Kirby Dick, Amy Ziering Kofman, Drakes Avenue Pictures, 2006.

18 Lucy, Niall, A Derrida Dictionary (Malden, Massachusetts and London, England: Blackwell Publishers, 2004), p. 160.

these assumptions, and although language is thoroughly compromised by the inferences within it, we have no recourse to an alternative. Christopher Norris observes that Derrida is often misunderstood in this regard. He writes that the propensity

> to take for granted that [post-structuralists] have *achieved*
>
> a radical break with forms of mimetic representation…is
>
> encouraged by a certain facile strain in current post-structuralist
>
> thinking, one that passes directly from the 'arbitrary' nature
>
> of the sign (lack of any natural or determinate link between
>
> signifier and signified) to the notion that texts cannot possibly
>
> 'refer' to any world outside their own rhetorical domain. On
>
> the contrary, Derrida argues: language is marked through and through by
>
> referential (or mimetic) assumptions, and there is
>
> no way of simply breaking their hold by a kind of deconstructive fiat.[19]

Thus a deconstructive reading does not simply invert and dispense with those logocentric forces at work within the text. Derrida seeks to demonstrate that deconstructing the logocentric assumptions upon which philosophy's attitude to writing, in particular, is based, is not a case of resolving the problem "in one fell swoop"[20]. On the contrary, Derrida advocates a deconstructive reading which makes apparent those points of logical tension, whilst simultaneously recognising that the resource of language is infested with logocentric prejudices which are constantly at work. By way of a parallel to the logocentrism of the text, the ocularcentrism inherent in certain readings of photography is partially disclosed through a deconstruction of the view, but as we have already seen, it is not long before the view begins to rewrite itself into the process. The concept that there is nothing outside of the text posits that

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19 Norris, *Derrida*, pp. 53-54.

20 Ibid., p. 56.

philosophy's claim to a transcendental truth which is to be found outside of language, is in fact inscribed within the text of philosophy itself. Therefore, critical interventions, such as deconstruction must come from inside language, and from inside of practice.

As we have already seen, one of the significant implications of reading landscape as text is that the landscape can no longer be considered as a view in the modern etymological sense, that is, a picture to be looked at from a distance, but a textual space within which the reader is immersed. The landscape as text is mobile, subject to continual deferral: *repeatable only as difference*. Thinking the landscape as text prompted my practice led investigation of the fragmentary view: a photographic engagement with landscape that took cognisance of the partiality of the framed image and dismantled the view in order to reconstruct it in different terms. The notion that the view could not be held within the viewfinder, that the images produced have a syntax of their own, is appealing. The view spills over a number of frames, exceeding every one: the view is disseminated across a sequence on individual images, the contents of each relating to one another in a non-logical way.

Coire Cas, Cairngorm National Park (*fig.10*)

By way of a resistance to the notion that the camera objectifies that which falls under its monocular pseudo-gaze, I have investigated the idea that the camera is a machine for writing rather than looking. The photograph of the landscape is relational, invaginated by gaps and infested by the double; it rewrites the landscape. With reference to the work of Rosalind Krauss, the photograph was explored in terms of a deferred sign rather than a transparent vehicle which enables the subject to be brought to presence. In short, the notion that the photograph is an exemplar of the metaphysics of presence was undermined, whilst taking cognisance of Derrida's warnings regarding naïve assumptions about the power of deconstruction. Derrida reminds us that deconstruction is always at work and it takes place with one foot inside of the system which is to be deconstructed. The ocular metaphor of photography is not so easily overturned: the view surreptitiously rewrites itself into my practice.

Thinking photography as grammatological, as a generalised system of differences, invites an understanding of the relation between landtext and photogrammatology that is intertextual. This brings me to the realisation that the space of my practice is textual, it is a productivity. Indeed, é*criture* and photography are both practices *and* the products of those practices. Seen from the perspective of writing of the world, photographic practice produces new configurations of the world, and although the photograph momentarily arrests the movement of the landscape, it sets off a play of meaning which is in turn constantly mobile. Photography as a practice of writing actualises spaces of textuality in which the possibility of meaning may be realised.

This article is accompanied by additional images at:
http://www.excursions-journal.org.uk/Gina_Wall/Gina_Wall.html

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Derrida. Dir. Kirby Dick, Amy Ziering Kofman. Drakes Avenue Pictures. 2006