

WHAT IT MEANS TO BE IMMENSE
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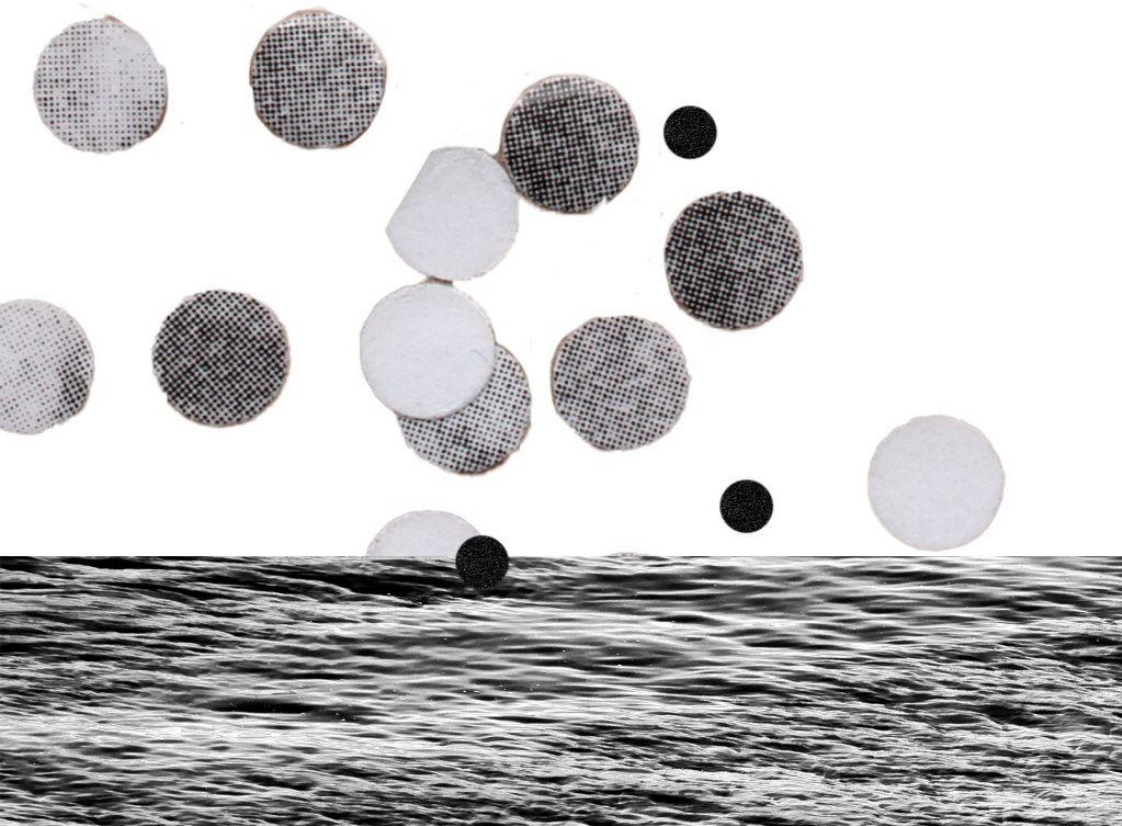


THE IMMENSITY OF BEING

*(Perspex and mirror; fishing wire; video projection. Supplemented
with library and studio materials)*

Words by Alexander Stubbs
Artwork and Design by Lydia Shearsmith

"It seemed to him that he moved forward laboriously, inch by inch, over the space of the vast prairie; but it seemed that he did not move through time at all, that rather time moved with him, an invisible cloud that hovered about him and clung to him as he went forward."
John Williams, *Butcher's Crossing*

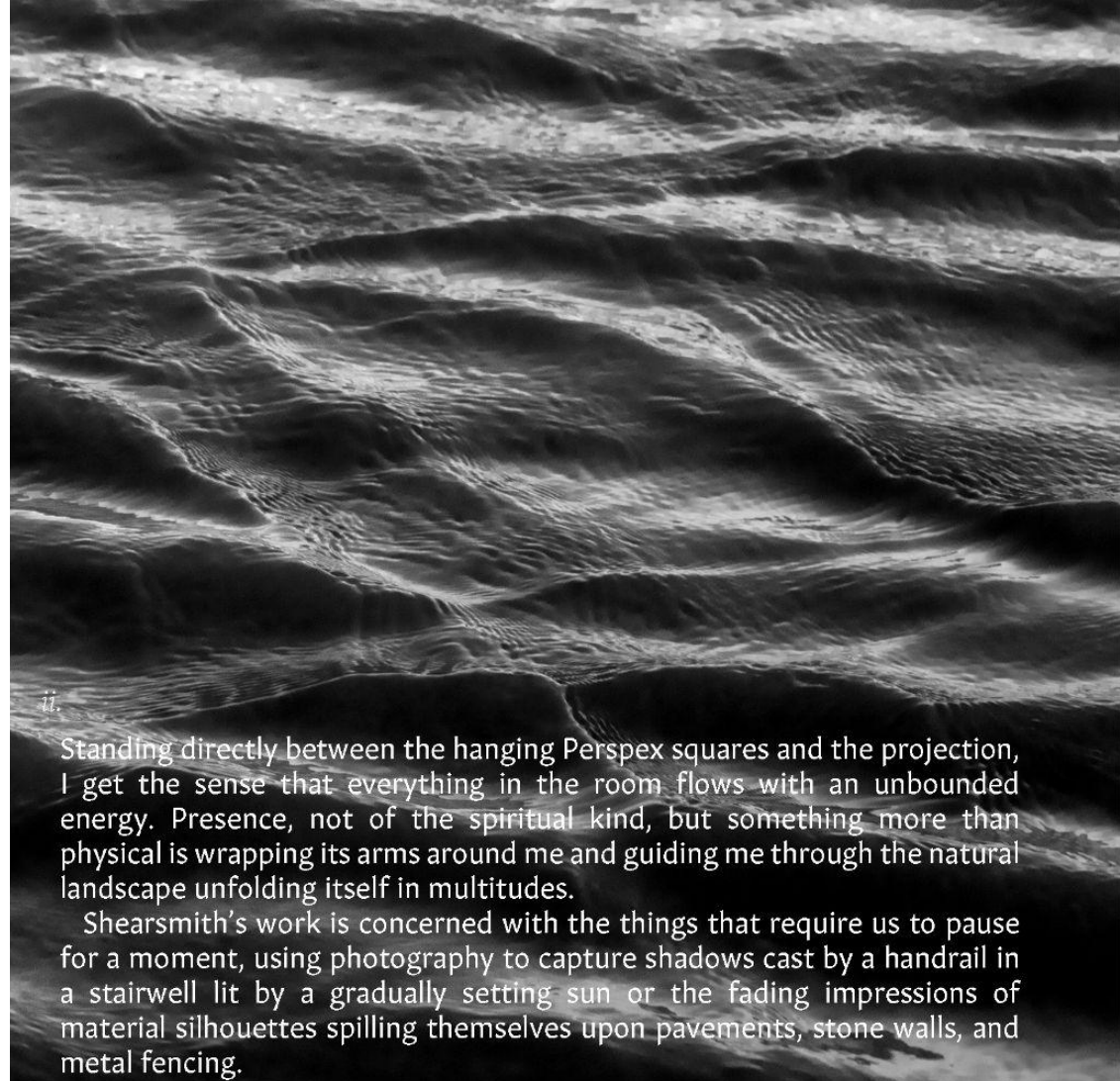




CLOUDS, WATER, & LIGHT

1.
i.

THE IMMENSITY OF BEING invites us through a landscape of shifting clouds, softly focused bodies of water, and patches of light that float and dissipate across the constructed space of the gallery, revealing themselves slowly, requesting and requiring our patience to understand their elemental being. Expanding the field of photography into a physical installation, artist Lydia Shearsmith encourages us to share in a celebration of infinite possibilities; those that lie beyond the gallery doors and windows, that exist in small and undisturbed pockets of our world.



ii.

Standing directly between the hanging Perspex squares and the projection, I get the sense that everything in the room flows with an unbounded energy. Presence, not of the spiritual kind, but something more than physical is wrapping its arms around me and guiding me through the natural landscape unfolding itself in multitudes.

Shearsmith's work is concerned with the things that require us to pause for a moment, using photography to capture shadows cast by a handrail in a stairwell lit by a gradually setting sun or the fading impressions of material silhouettes spilling themselves upon pavements, stone walls, and metal fencing.

iii.

Skewing perspective through tonal blur, realignment, and shape manipulation, Shearsmith often uses the post-production process to draw out abstractions in her work, highlighting the surfaces upon which she fixates her gaze. Though industrial materials such as bike racks, metal signs, and windows are the subjects through which Shearsmith explores the value of light, the natural is an equally important collaborator in Shearsmith's search for small, underappreciated complexities.

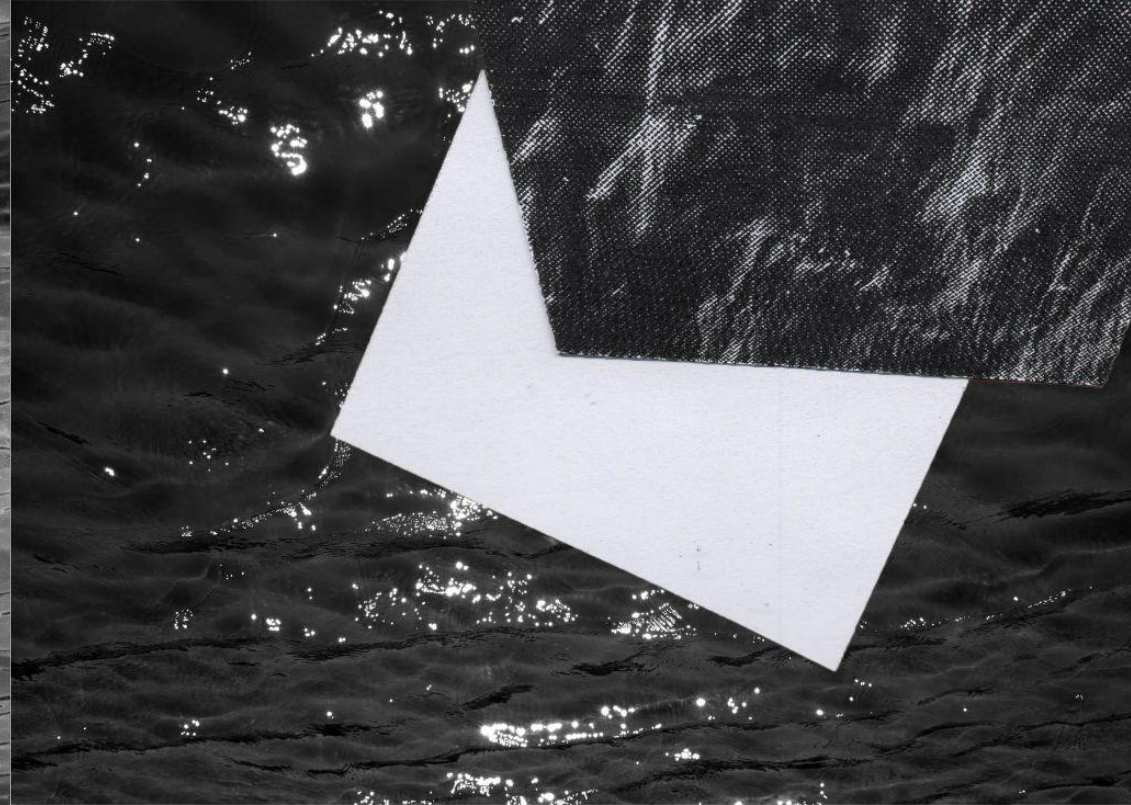


iv.
Searching for an indication of how the movements and undulations of surfaces in rivers and canals hold themselves in Shearsmith's work, I think back to David Company's essay in John Divola's *Scapes*:

v.

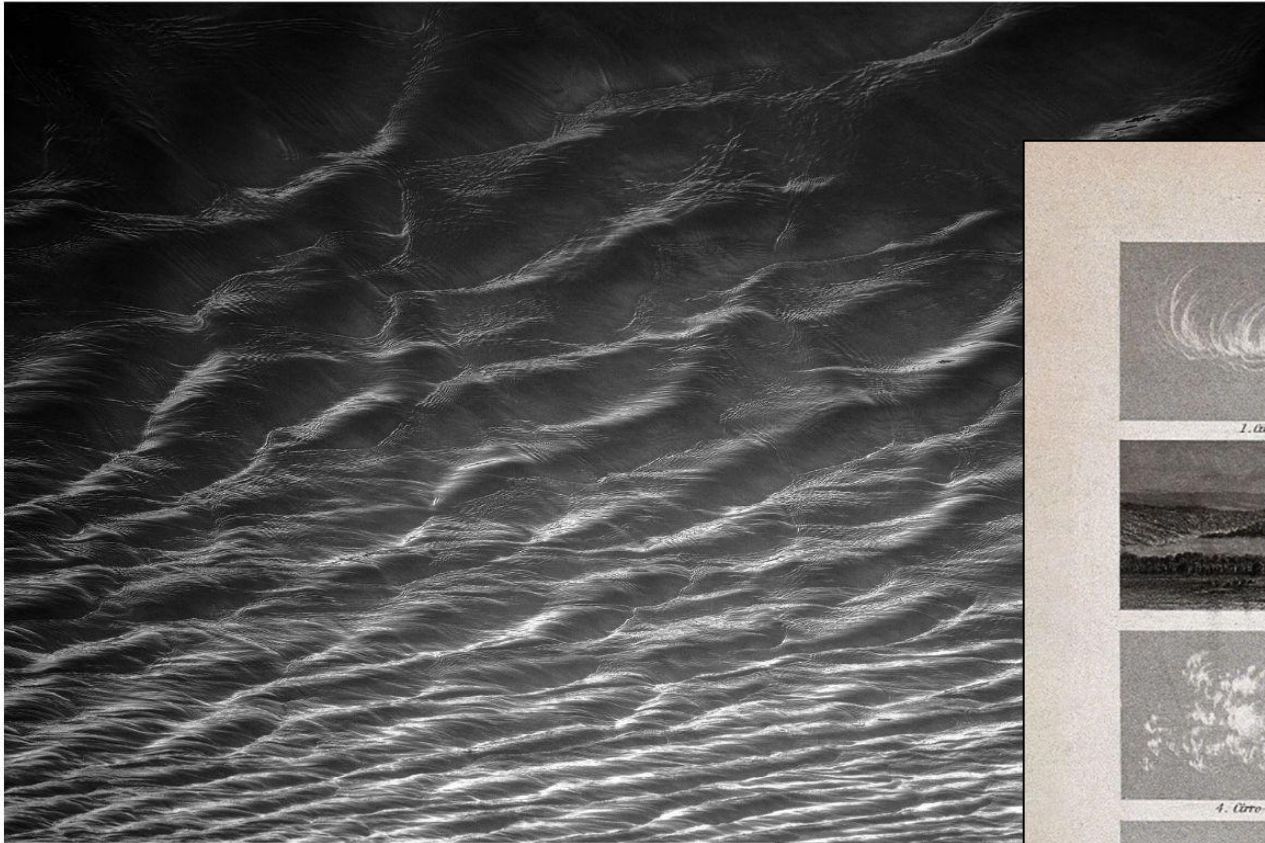
“There is a passage in Jean-Paul Sartre’s Being and Nothingness in which the writer describes a person walking alone in a forest, feeling at one with it, and momentarily losing their sense of self. The person comes to the edge of a clearing. Looking across the clearing, the person glimpses another person in the distance. The stranger is far enough away that no details about them are discernible, beyond being human. But the presence of this stranger changes everything. Neither person can be at one with the space, which is now shared, charged, social. There is an ethical demand, and a focussed sense of self that results from being perceived by another”.

David Company, Scapes (John Divola)



vi.

Shearsmith avoids the presence of the stranger. It is the ripples in the water and the movement of the clouds that are alone; singular, isolated in space without the imposition of the human body upon their surfaces. In other, sometimes more controversial terms, Shearsmith is searching for the natural. In her work it is us, the viewer, who act as Sartre’s lone stranger, attempting to find synergy and oneness with what it is that we are viewing. Best experienced alone, the presence of another person in the room disrupts us, breaking us out of our hypnosis and eliminating the possibility of finding connection with the film.



CLOUD. WATER-SPOUT.

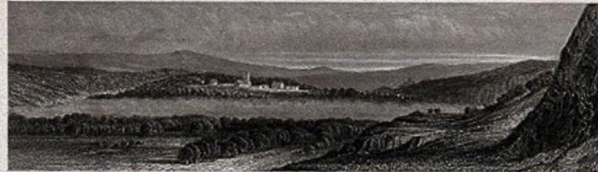
PLATE IX.



1. *Cirrus.*



2. *Cumulus.*



3. *Stratus.*



4. *Cirro-cumulus.*



5. *Cirro-stratus.*



6. *Cumulo-stratus.*



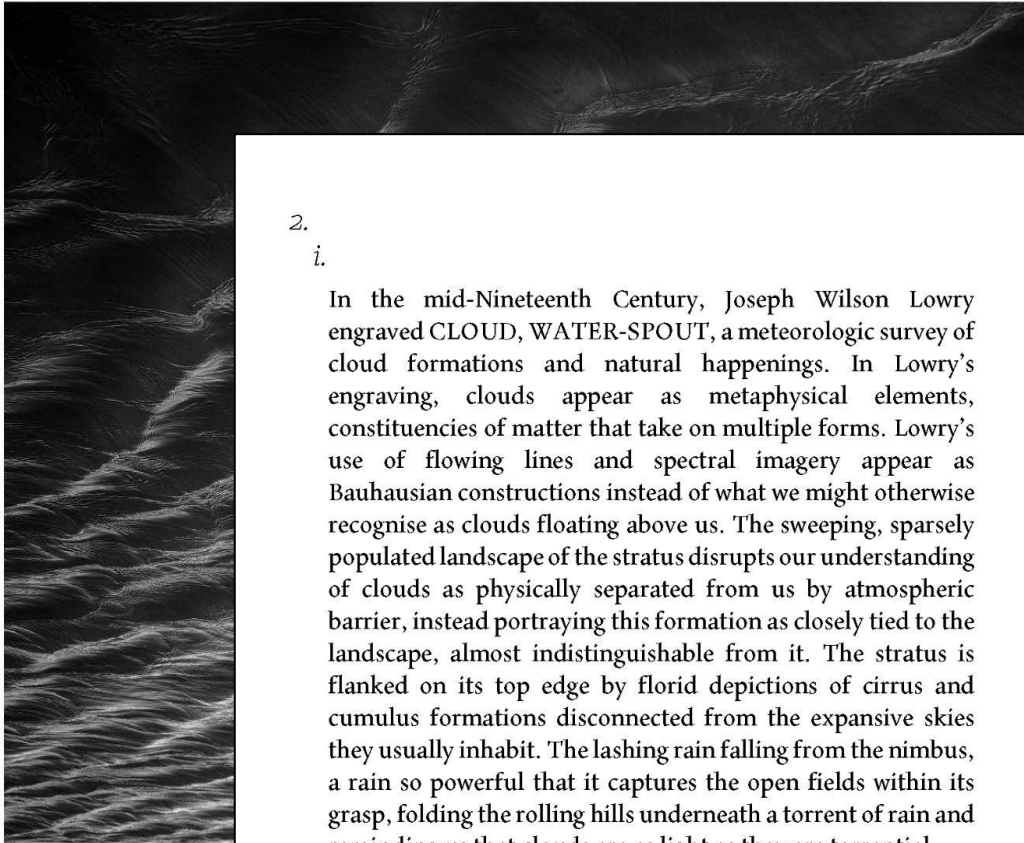
8. *Water-spout.*



7. *Cæculo-cirro-stratus, or Nimbus.*

J. M. Linné G.





2.

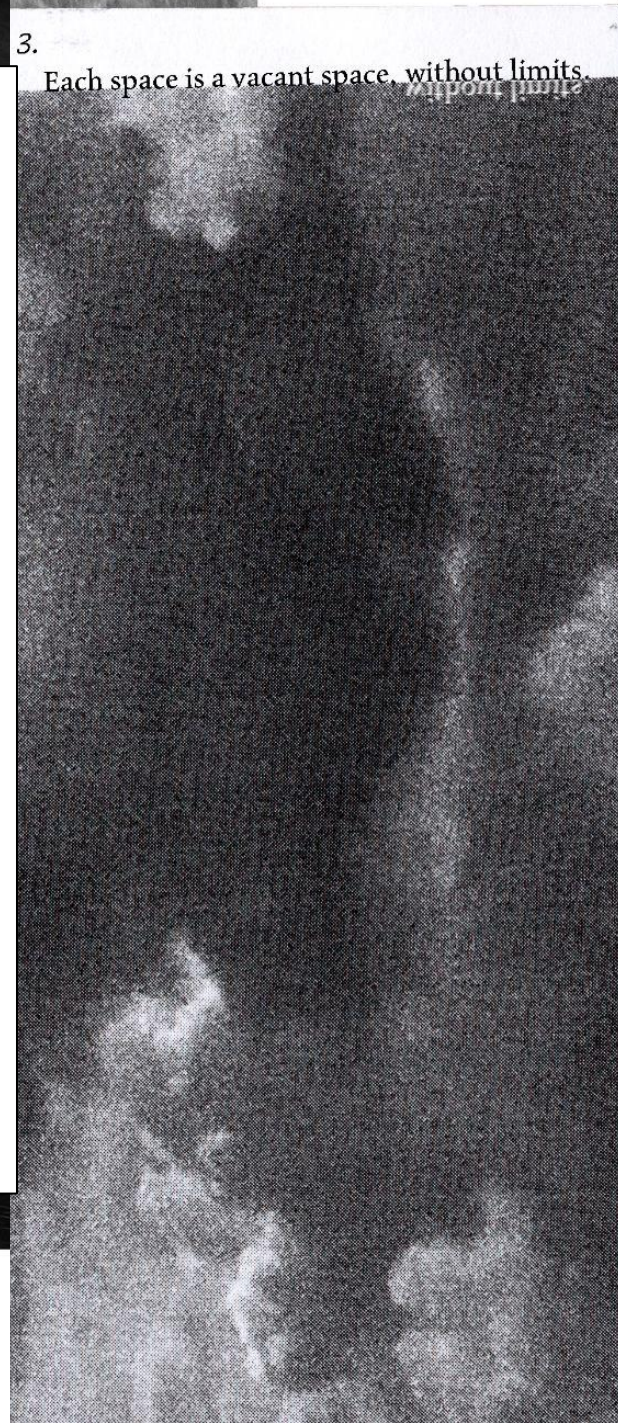
i.

In the mid-Nineteenth Century, Joseph Wilson Lowry engraved CLOUD, WATER-SPOUT, a meteorologic survey of cloud formations and natural happenings. In Lowry's engraving, clouds appear as metaphysical elements, constituencies of matter that take on multiple forms. Lowry's use of flowing lines and spectral imagery appear as Bauhausian constructions instead of what we might otherwise recognise as clouds floating above us. The sweeping, sparsely populated landscape of the stratus disrupts our understanding of clouds as physically separated from us by atmospheric barrier, instead portraying this formation as closely tied to the landscape, almost indistinguishable from it. The stratus is flanked on its top edge by florid depictions of cirrus and cumulus formations disconnected from the expansive skies they usually inhabit. The lashing rain falling from the nimbus, a rain so powerful that it captures the open fields within its grasp, folding the rolling hills underneath a torrent of rain and reminding us that clouds are as light as they are torrential.



3.

Each space is a vacant space, without limits.



3.

i.

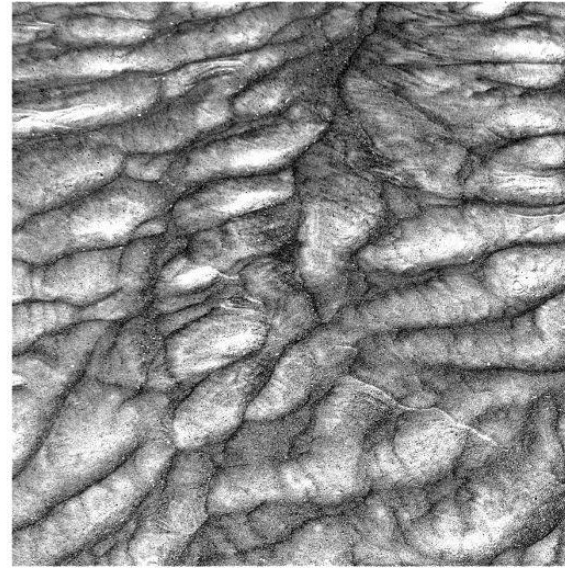
Clouds appear abstracted in Shearsmith's video, floating across the wall as if a cross-breeze had found its way inside the room, pulling the clouds down to earth much like puppets tied down by a heavy rope. Shearsmith's clouds bide their time in their reveal; they are a steady stream of nature's imaginative material in flux.



4.
i.

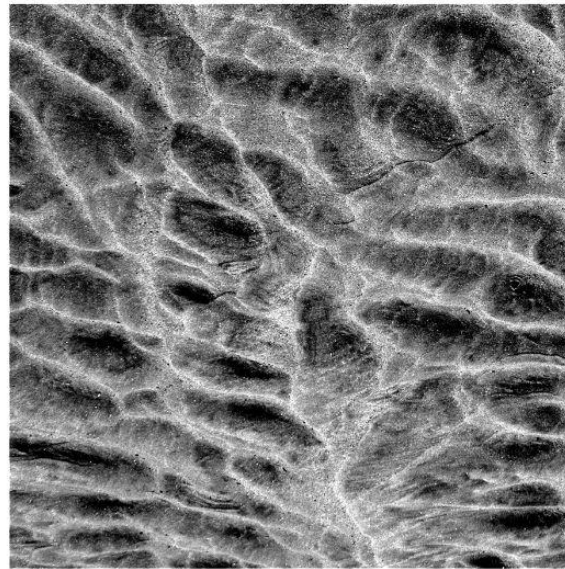
In writing this text, I found myself searching through digital archives, hoping to stumble upon visual material that would complete my understanding of the work. In a collection of scientific documents and photographs held in the Caltech archives, one specific photograph reveals the immense vacuity of space in collision. It is a photograph of a cloud chamber: a particle detector used for visualising the passage of ionizing radiation, more scientific document than artistic artefact but nonetheless telling of how light transforms space from a desolate surface to a busy highway of expansive brightness.

ii.



Specifically, the photograph is of the inside of the cloud chamber whilst in motion. As scientific evidence, the photographic negative captures the intensity of particles through a process of expanding air inside the chamber and condensing water vapor, revealing a trail of particles held in the vapor cloud.

iii.



To me it is not simply scientific evidence, but a visual representation of what it means to be immense. It is a photograph charged with limitless possibilities, filled with a world beyond our own experienced only through one's imagination. Shearsmith's video reveals itself to me in much the same way.

“Surfaces are where radiant energy is reflected or absorbed, where vibrations are passed to the medium, where vaporisation or diffusion into the medium occur, and what our bodies come up against in touch.”

Tim Ingold

PERSPEX & MIRROR

1.

i.

There is a slight dislocation in how the Perspex and the mirrors hang. They are not quite freely moving, nor are they fixed. They equally obstruct and facilitate insight, redact and make visible. Suspended from the ceiling with fishing wire, the panels rotate with their own gravity; small portals each displaying a microcosmic film of passing viewers, gallery furniture, windows and doors and, if you catch the view just right, the projection itself.

ii.

When Douglas Adams described the appearance of the Vogon's ships, an overly officious and bureaucratic alien race that feature in Adams' *A Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, he illustrated them as hanging in the sky "much the same way that bricks don't." With weight, unnatural in the way they hover, defying our perception of physical possibility with their heavy clunking bodies and repulsion of aesthetics.

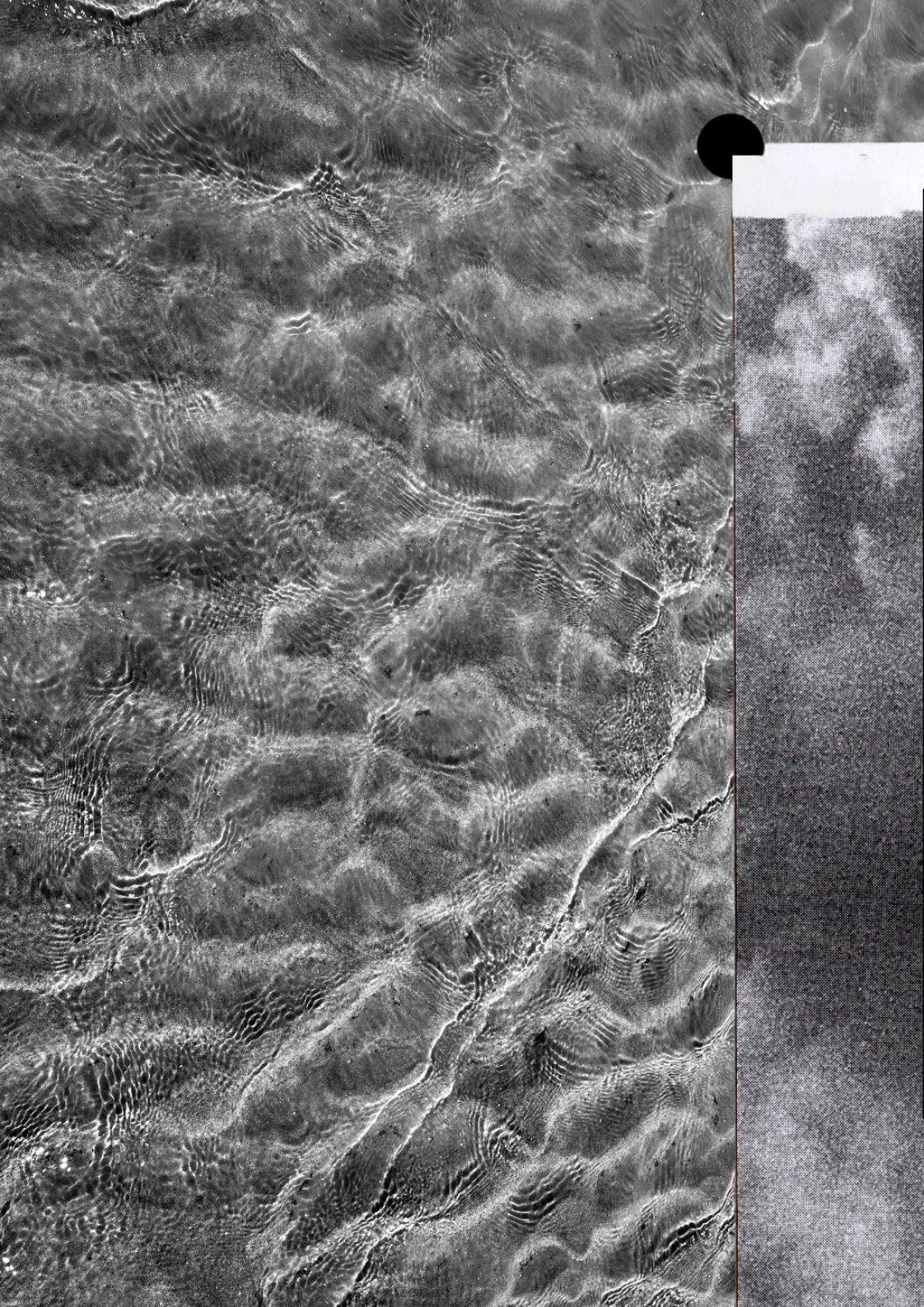


iii.

Shearsmith's Perspex panels and square mirrors don't hang with this same implausibility, though they hover with a magnitude that demands our attention. They appear light; sometimes weightless in the space, loaded only with the heaviness of the reflections of the world around them. Their hard surfaces are transmogrified into surfaces of liquidity, warped by the movement of water washing over the shore and clouds peeking into view.

iv.

These mirrors are pockets of trapped imagination, windows into an alternate universe where images are fleeting and out of reach. They are voids, particularly when their silhouettes obstruct the projection and, when that happens, they become part of the film, even if just for a moment.*



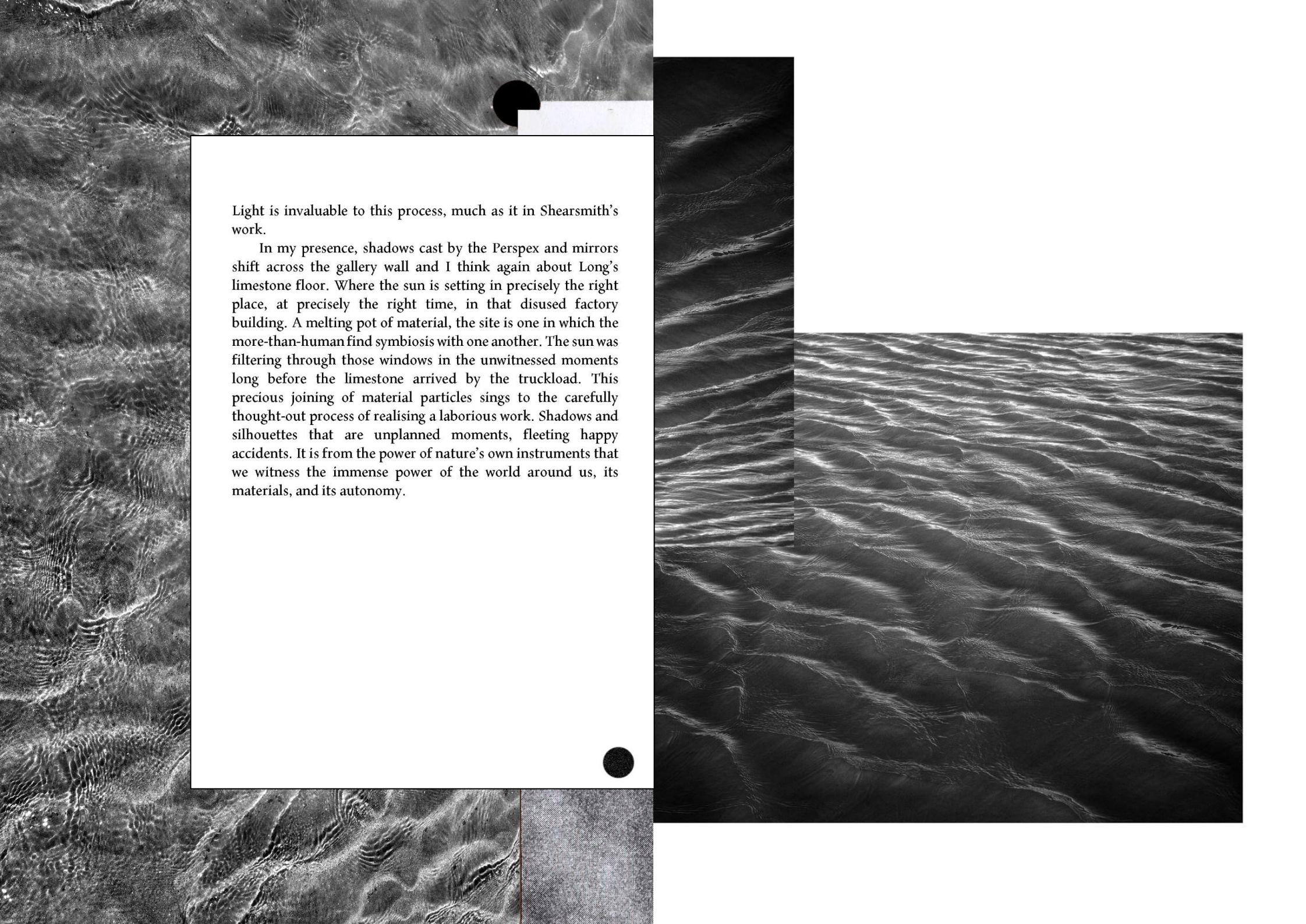
2.

In 1987, eponymous land artist Richard Long's ALLOTMENT 1: STONE FIELD found its way into being. Long had seventy tonnes of white limestone chippings sourced from a North Wales quarry unloaded into the vacant space of a Renshaw Hall, a vacant former employment office in the industrial heart of Liverpool. The same year that saw the re-election of Margaret Thatcher and the continuation of debilitating economic politics, whilst the preceding years had vainly produced a sharp increase in pit closures, unemployment, and protests in cities across the UK.

Filmmaker Colette Culbert documented the process of clearing the industrial space and the subsequent loading and unloading of limestone, capturing the heavy weight of construction and labour against the backdrop of urban decay. After a lengthy process of readying the empty building, the final few moments of the film reveal Long's artwork in its fullness. Thirty-seven meters long by twenty meters wide, the flat landscape of white limestone appears as its own canvas, sharp in the corners as if it had been stretched over the wooden batons of the concrete beneath.

Culbert's film is charged with nostalgia; for a space that once was and is now not. No paint is spilled over Long's canvas, only shadows cast upon its bright surface. It is these shadows of the window panes, found high up in the rafters of the building's frame, that glow crystalline yellow across the limestone. The building is impressing itself on STONE FIELD, consciously and joyfully leaving its mark.





Light is invaluable to this process, much as it in Shearsmith's work.

In my presence, shadows cast by the Perspex and mirrors shift across the gallery wall and I think again about Long's limestone floor. Where the sun is setting in precisely the right place, at precisely the right time, in that disused factory building. A melting pot of material, the site is one in which the more-than-human find symbiosis with one another. The sun was filtering through those windows in the unwitnessed moments long before the limestone arrived by the truckload. This precious joining of material particles sings to the carefully thought-out process of realising a laborious work. Shadows and silhouettes that are unplanned moments, fleeting happy accidents. It is from the power of nature's own instruments that we witness the immense power of the world around us, its materials, and its autonomy.

4.

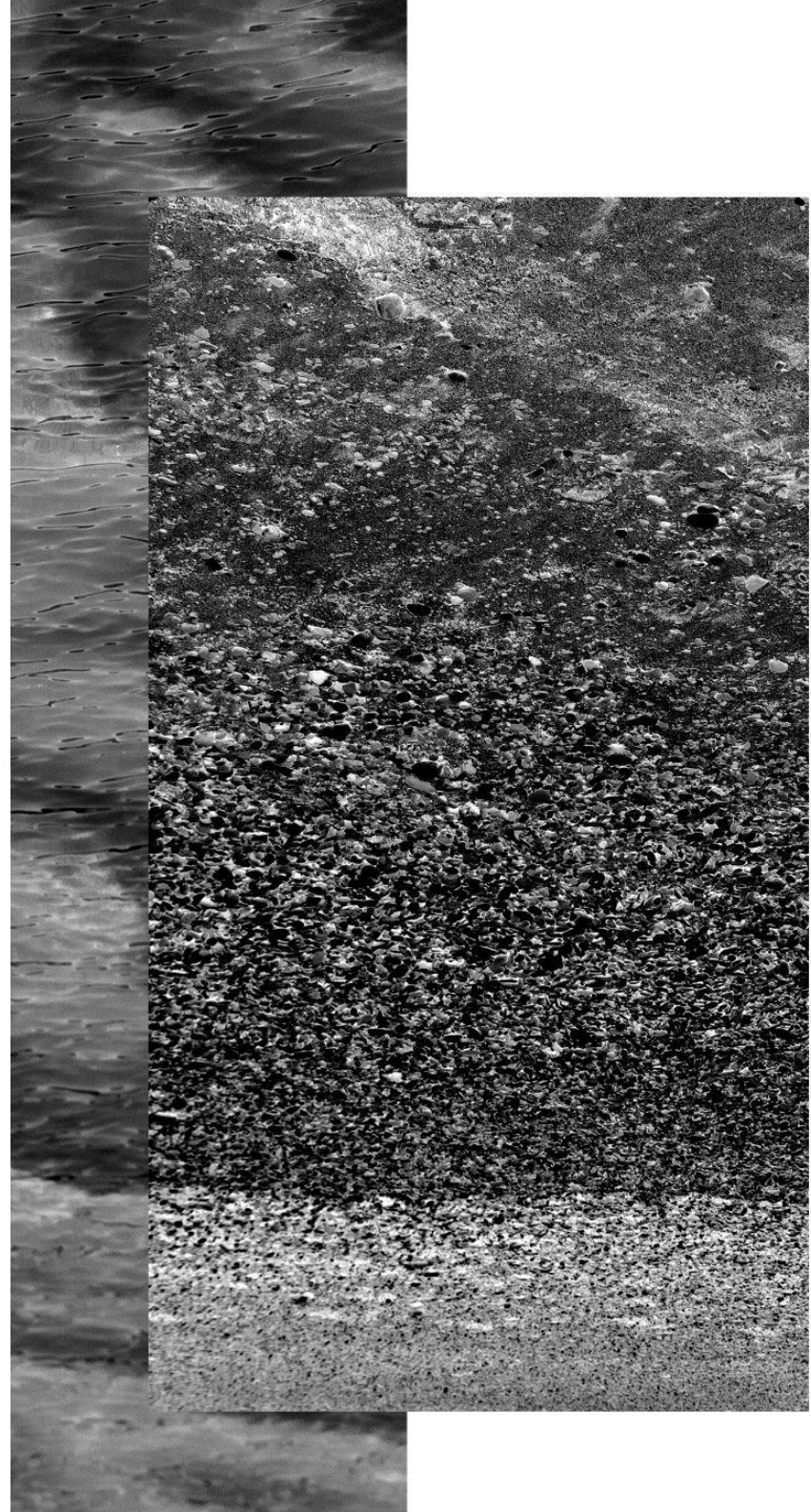
I stand searchingly in front of the Perspex squares and mirrors that are part of Lydia Shearsmith's video-projection and installation THE IMMENSITY OF BEING, catching the reflection of myself every now and then as the panes rotate.

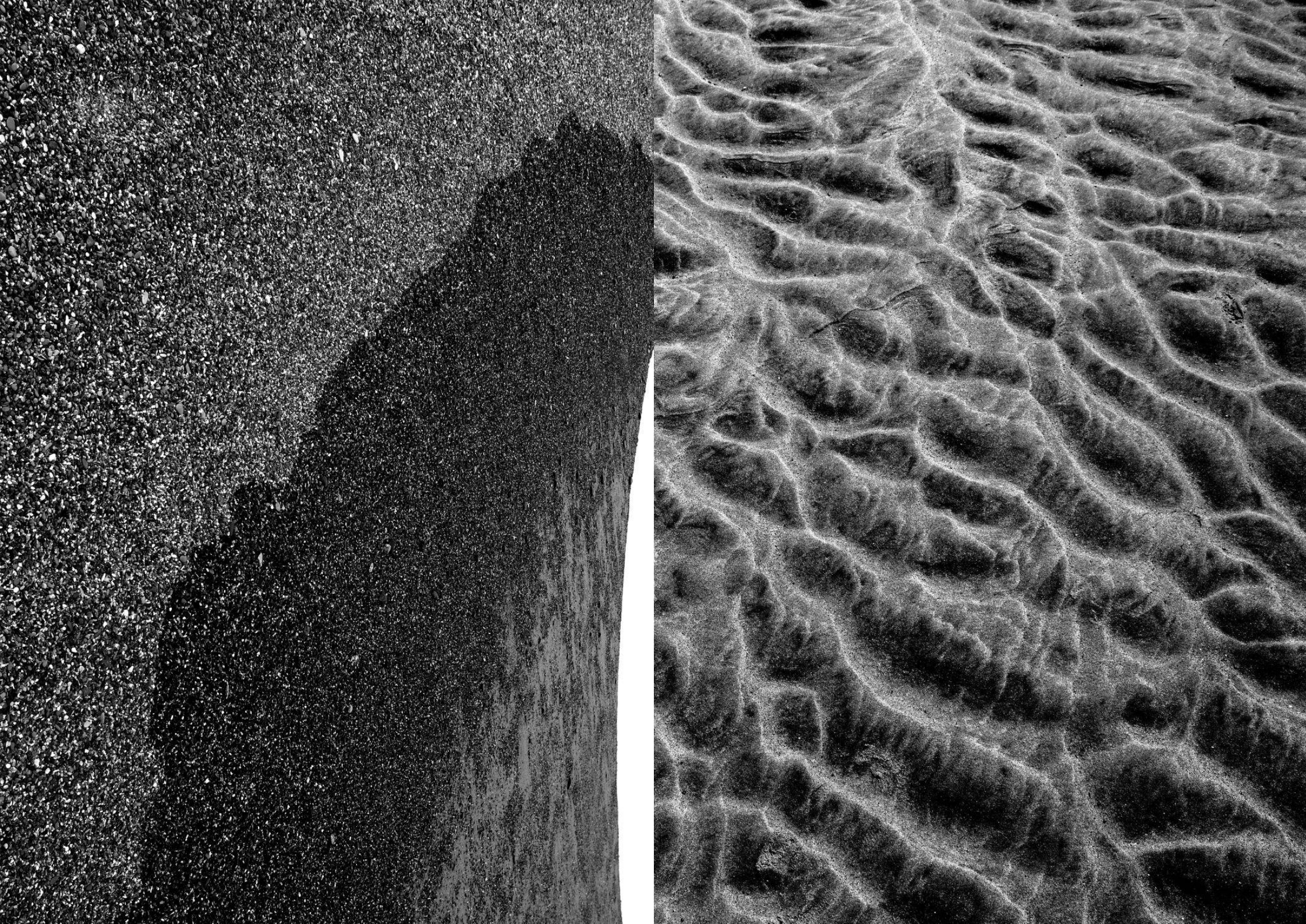
They're slow.

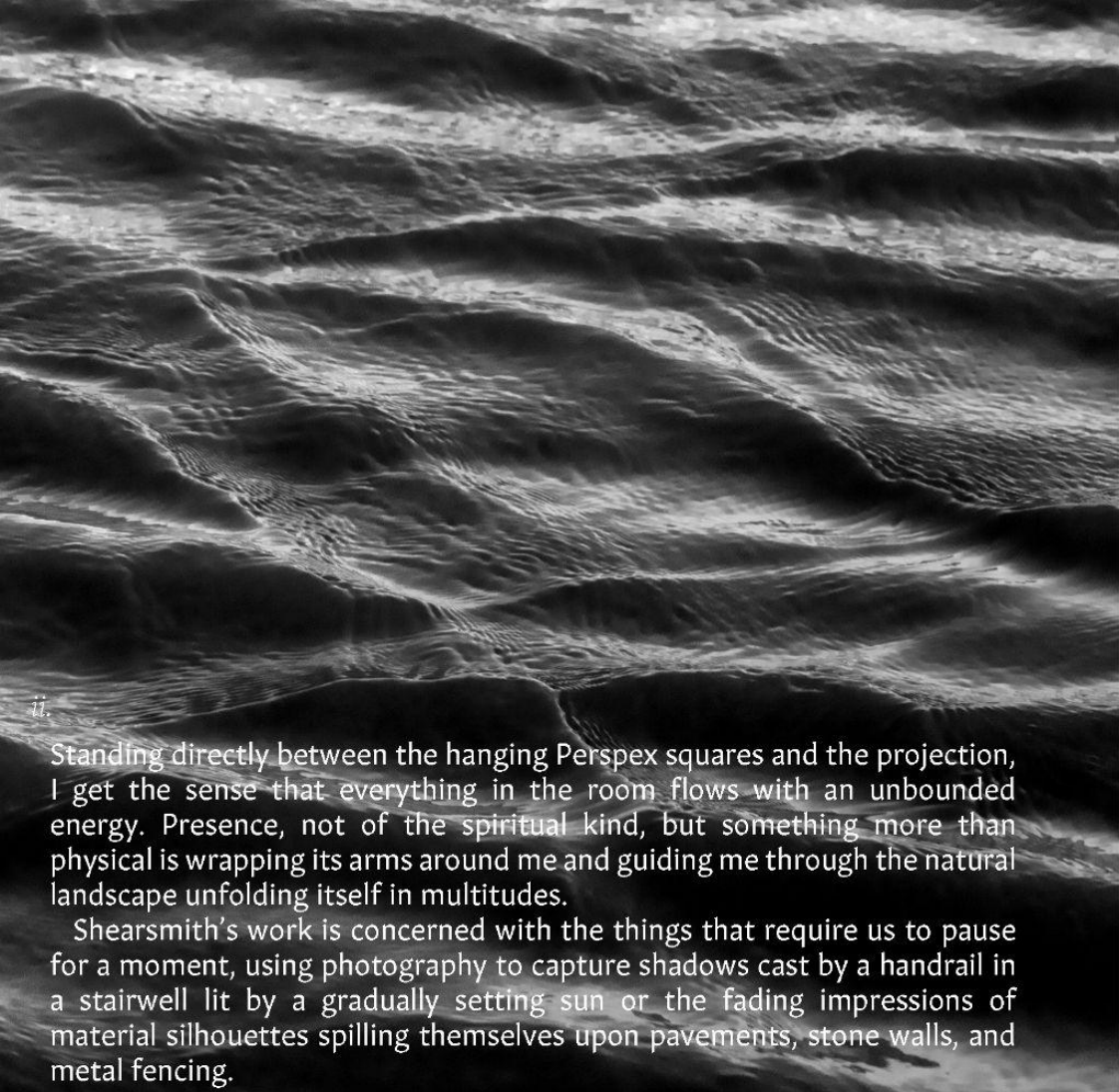
On thin fishing wire they suspend themselves from the ceiling, a landscape of semi-opaque and reflective surfaces floating patiently.

They slow me down.

They wait for me to find them, encouraging movement around their perimeter as they continue to change their perspective with each whisper of wind that carries through the room. We should watch them dance before us and take our time with their intricacies of movement, almost as if they were really a procession of tangled bodies moving individually but under the same choreography.







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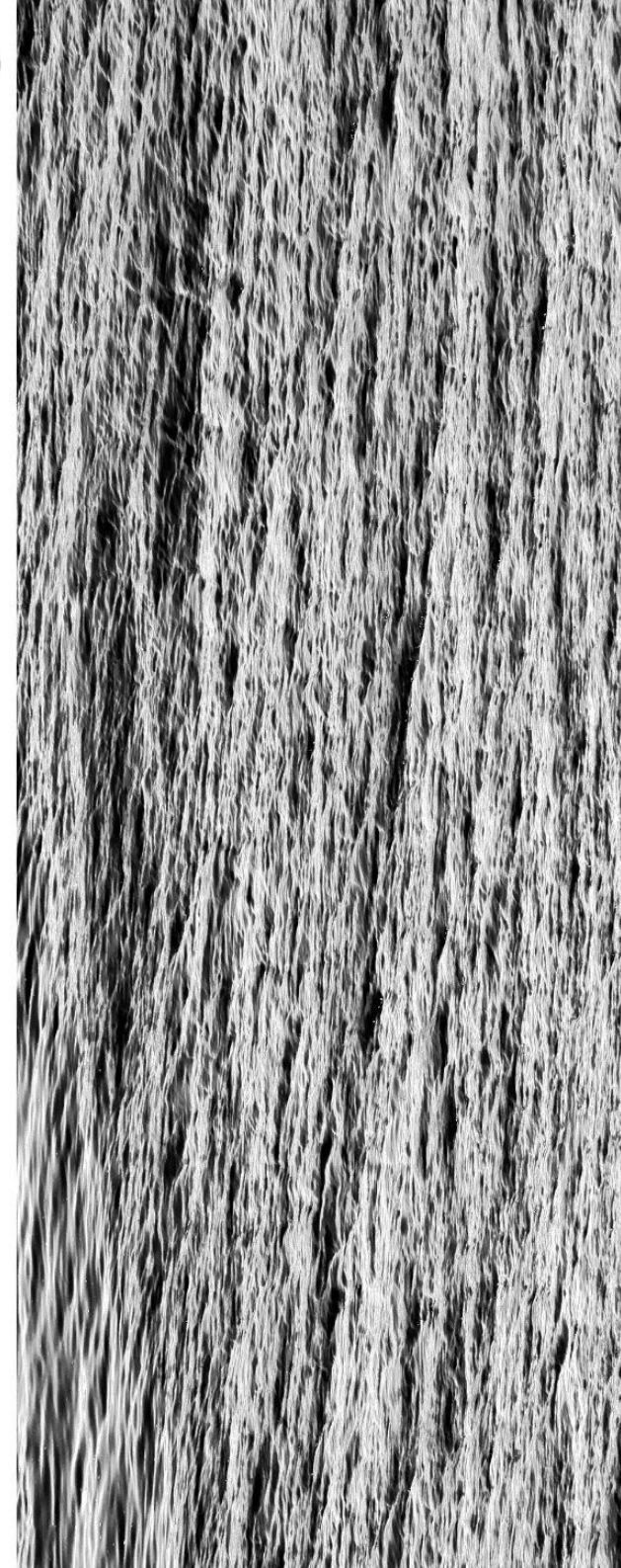
There are shadows that pass across the wall, redacting images underneath. I wait for them to pass, but then another shadow appears before I can read the picture aloud and I must wait again for the next pass around to arrive.

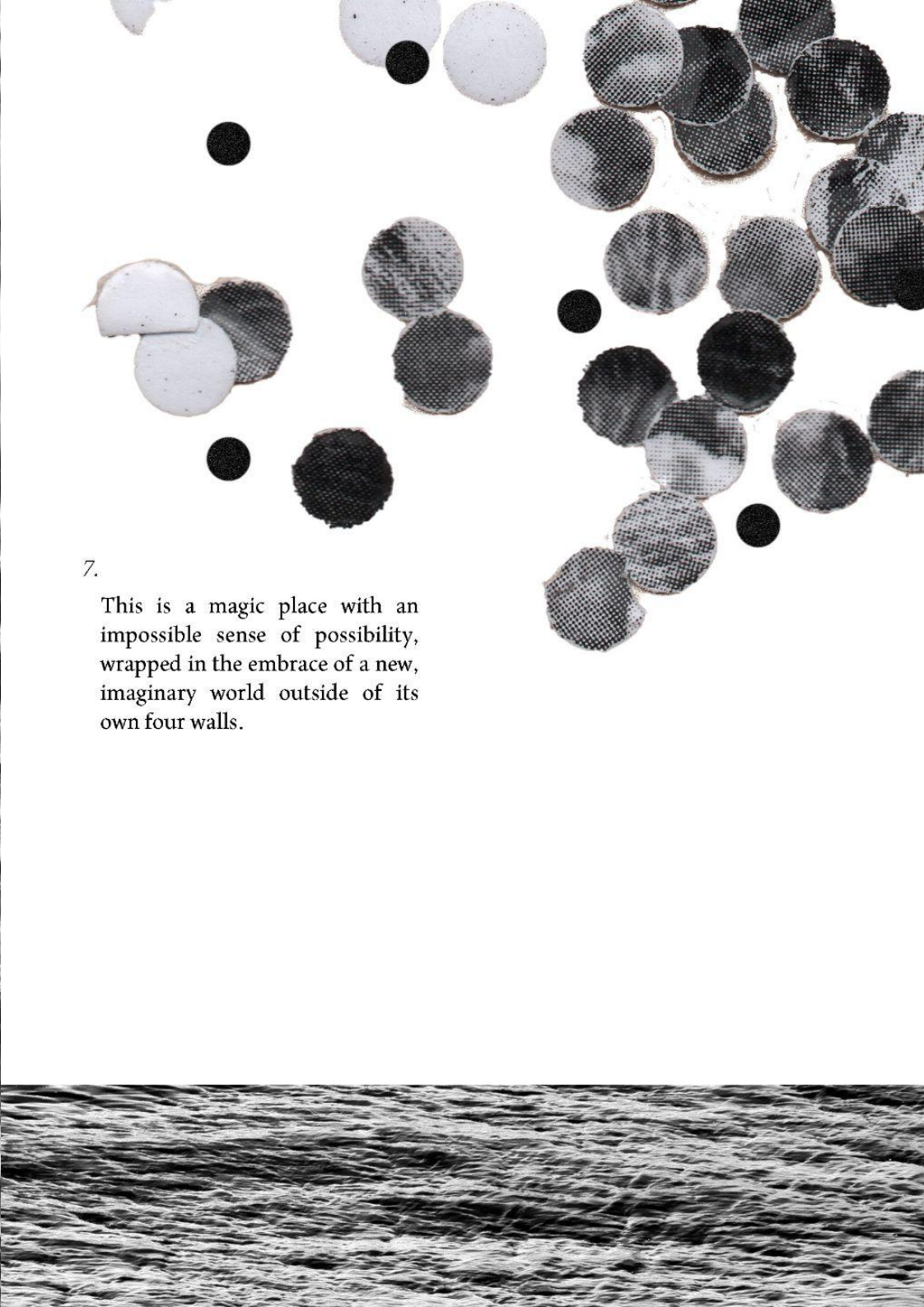
It doesn't.

I think again about Richard Long's work, how he must have intimately understood and spent time with the architecture within which he sited his work so much so that the shadows falling across the limestone became an extension of his laboured hand.

I think also about how it must feel for the artist to see herself within her own work. If Shearsmith were to stand in the midst of the installation, we should consider her image in its mirrors and her shadow casted upon her own projections as something akin to the tradition of the hidden artist.

I consider myself to be within this work. Shadows form again across the projection in front of me, shadows with which I feel a sense of physical connectedness. I consider myself to be within this work. A mirror rotates next to me, and I catch a glimpse of my face, curious and concerned, in its reflective frame; I notice my presence, slightly skewed and warped, and step aside.





7.

This is a magic place with an impossible sense of possibility, wrapped in the embrace of a new, imaginary world outside of its own four walls.

END NOTE

1. *This extract was partly inspired by the multitude of thoughts, discussions, and ideas shared during Streams, an ongoing collaboration between 87 Gallery and The Critical Fish.*

*The Immensity of Being exhibited at 87 Gallery, Hull
between July 8th 2023 - 16th September 2023*

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