



SEEING IS FEELING
Alex Gaite 2021

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SEEING IS FEELING

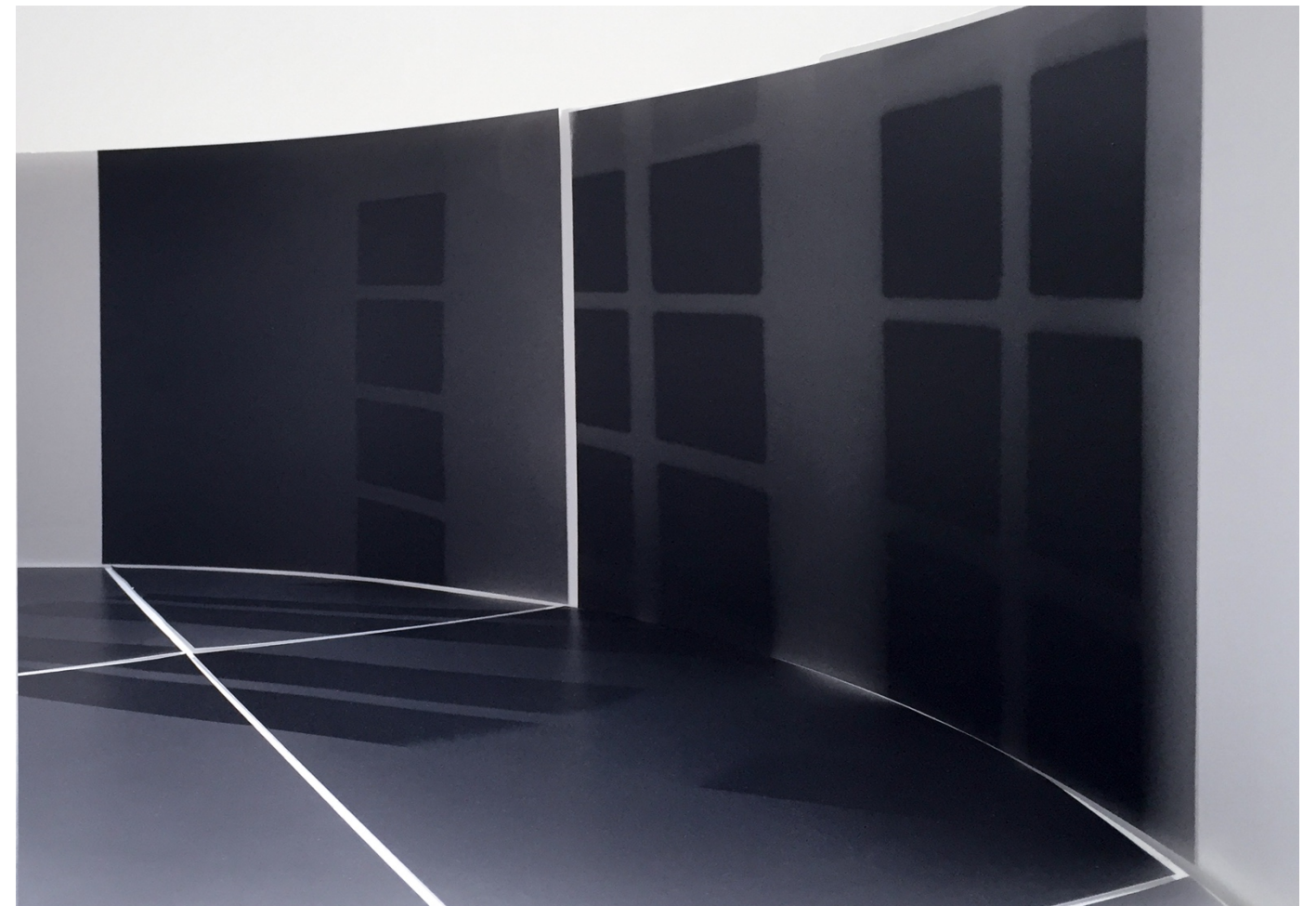


Seeing is Feeling brings together the work of four artists whose work investigates the materiality of light and its relationship to vision, touch and time. The work on display can be situated within the expanded field of contemporary photography, but is not limited to print-based outcomes, instead it takes a multitude of forms, including sculpture, installation, film and print-media. Each artist has been selected for their unique approach to the shared themes of materiality, temporality, indexicality and the phenomenology of looking at art.

Liz Deschenes makes 'photography about photography' (Deschenes, 2000), describing her work as self-reflexive (in Peterson, 2012) and research-led. Her practice is multi-layered; her photographs simultaneously represent the past, present and future; referring to the history of photography, to the conditions of making and exhibiting work, and to the transience of the chemical processes she works with.

Of the four exhibiting artists, Deschenes most explicitly invites a phenomenological reading of her work. Not only does the viewer physically interact with her work by moving around it to view it from different vantage points, they become part of the image as they see themselves reflected in the mirror-like surfaces of her prints.

Interaction between viewer and artwork is also integral to Nancy Holt's practice, whose large-scale earthworks are viewed from the inside. Holt is better known for her site-specific land art than for her



photography, but observation and looking are central concepts in her work. Frames are a frequent motif in Holt's work, used like a viewfinder to direct the gaze to a specific point in space – often literally.

Her installation *Holes of Light* (1973) functions like a giant camera obscura in the centre of the exhibition, connecting to all of the works on display in the gallery by demonstrating how they were made. Furthermore, the touching of light on a surface is a fundamental consideration for each artist in the show, but whilst the other artists present the outcome of that action, Holt's installation allows the viewer to become part of it; they, themselves can be touched by light.

Associations between time and place lie at the heart of Marie Clerel's art practice. Using cameraless photography techniques, Clerel captures the natural light of a specific time and location, visually representing the conditions the work was made in. Clerel invites the viewer to reflect on their personal associations with the moment in time the work refers to; the meaning of the work lies in the viewer's own history and their memory of it.

Alex Gaites also explores the relationship between light, time and place. Gaites' practice considers whether a haptic response can be triggered by looking, and approaches this through further investigations into the interconnected nature of indexical communication and materiality.

SEEING IS FEELING



Seeing is Feeling examines how these artists collectively communicate their ideas. All four artists are engaged with the concepts of temporality, materiality, indexicality and haptic perception. Each concept can be related to a specific point in the process of making, exhibiting and looking.

Temporality is introduced at the point the work is generated, whether or not it is central to the concept of an artwork. All of the works on show are time-based: film and photography both present visual records of the passing of time, whereas installation exists in time: the activity of engaging with installation art is time-based.

Materiality is the container for the artist's ideas: the materials of the art work are the means in which the concept of the work is delivered to an audience. Furthermore, the artists in this exhibition promote materiality to being central to the subject of their work as well as the stuff it is made from.

Indexicality connects subject, artist and audience and provides the physical proof that the artist was in front of the subject. Photographs are described as indexical because light travels from subject to photo-sensitive surface and into the eye of the viewer (Wells, 2004). Photographs are indexical signs of the subject they depict, but they also have an indexical relationship to the original light source that made them, as all of the artists in this show demonstrate.



Haptic perception is defined by Goysdotter as a "means to engage with the materiality of the image, or to see a photograph as multisensuous" (2012, pp.27). It is the experience of sensing touch through looking, and is realised through the presence of indexical and material communication. Haptic perception is essentially how the work exhibited is interpreted when viewed.

The architecture of the gallery *Seeing is Feeling* is exhibited is a quiet contributor to the effectiveness of this exhibition. Uniquely this gallery is art-work specific (as opposed to a site-specific art work), in that it was specifically built to show the *Seeing is Feeling* exhibition.

Roland Barthes described cameras as clocks for seeing (1993), and Liz Deschenes compared gallery spaces to cameras, functioning as a viewfinder to the world (2019). This gallery is both camera and clock. The layout of the gallery positions Marie Clerel's *Midi* at the 12.00 position, and *Light Touch* was made in the midday light that poured into the gallery from behind Clerel's cyanotypes. The windows act as a viewfinder to the outside world, but also as device for framing the works inside the gallery.



LIZ DESCHENES

The first encounter of this exhibition belongs to Liz Deschenes and it takes place before the viewer enters the gallery. Two unique silver-toned photograms are displayed high above the gallery entrance. They are minimal, they look abstract, and they reveal very little about their subject matter...

Once described as a 'quiet giant of post-conceptual photography', Deschenes' work is in fact bold and assured in its message, but requires an attentive ear and a keen eye to 'get' the picture.

'Untitled' (2018) was first shown at the New York Public Library as part of the *Anna Atkins: Refracted Contemporary Works* exhibition. Both there and here, the work is deliberately installed above eye level and outside of the main exhibition. The positioning of this work, and its potential to be overlooked, refers to the historic overlooking of Anna Atkins as a critical figure in early photography – and particularly regarding her contribution to the development of photography as art.

Deschenes' photograms tell the story of their making: the light, the materials and the labour of their production. Marks are visible in the fragile silver surface left by the artist's handling of the work during development. Atmospheric conditions such as temperature and humidity affect the quality of the prints, as does the ratio of moonlight to ambient electric light that exposes the prints at night. These cameraless photographs are pictorial manifestations of light, time and space; they are photographic indices of the moment in which they were generated. As purely indexical representations, the works are physically connected to their source or referent, like the fingerprint to the finger and just as unique. The photograms visibly depict moonlight, albeit in an abstracted form, but are also of *moonlight*, in that moonlight is the medium of their creation.

Susan Sontag described a photograph as a thin slice of space and time (1977). However, Deschenes' photograms are not static slices of time forever frozen in the image; they are visual records of the passing of time (it can take up to thirty-six hours for Deschenes to produce a single photogram), and they are continually evolving via the process of oxidation. The result is that on each occasion the work is exhibited it has changed by absorbing and embodying the light of its previous locations, and each new audience sees a subtly transformed version of the work.

In *Rates (Sixty Frames Per Second)* (2018), Deschenes concretises Sontag's slices of time by way of sixty evenly spaced, 60"x 2.5" photograms, displayed in a continuous line along the curved wall of the gallery. Deschenes' intention is to challenge how time is perceived by inviting audiences to experience time as a material entity. As the viewer walks the length of the series, the prints are transformed into a visual metronome: creating rhythm, keeping time and drawing attention to the passing of one second of time, extended, as the viewer completes their walk to the end of the line. The work references Étienne-Jules Marey's composite photographs of the body in motion, and an alternative representation of slices of time, visualised. Marey used a camera that could make sixty exposures per second, providing the title of this piece.

Drawing on the phenomenology of looking at art, Deschenes determines that her work is open to interpretation; that the viewer cannot understand the work as she does, but that their individualised experience of the work, and of themselves in relation to the work and the space it is shown in, will inform their reading of it (2018). This is achieved through the materiality of the photograms: their

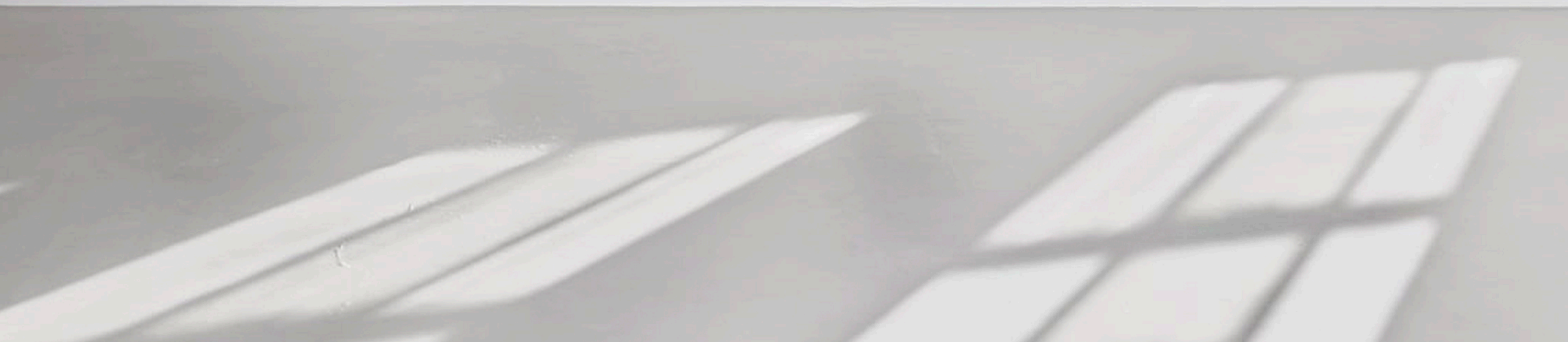
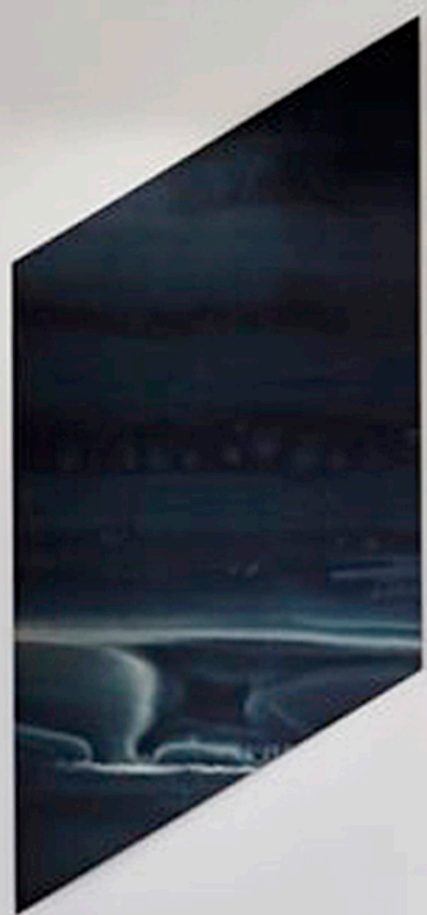
highly polished, silvery surfaces that function as mirrors, reflecting their surroundings and inviting the viewer to interact with the work. The viewer becomes an active agent of the work, making decisions about what they want to see in that reflected surface; whether it is that is the architectural elements of the gallery, another artists' work or their own reflection.

In Deschenes' final work in the exhibition she continues her approach in responding conceptually to the history of photography whilst also literally reflecting the present. *Bracket* (2013) was initially simultaneously shown in London and Paris - two cities that both claim to be the birthplace of photography via inventors Louis Daguerre in Paris and Henry Fox Talbot in London. The twin exhibitions were a way for Deschenes to reignite a dialogue about the significance experimentation in current photography practice.



Bracket is a series of four large photograms, made under moonlight as with Deschenes' other works. The work was commissioned for the gallery it was first shown in. Deschenes maintained her approach in terms of process but responded to the space by creating parallelogram-shaped prints in reference to the shape of the gallery's skylights, explaining "I like to work with the spaces I've been given, but not necessarily the light I've been given, I think this kind of intervention slows people down" (in Ballard, 2014, pp.2)

The conditions of display are a crucial communicator for Deschenes, whose art practice is informed by her work as a curator as well as a university professor. In the case of both series in *Seeing is Feeling*, Deschenes' prints bear a direct relationship with the space. The hanging of *Rates (Sixty Frames per Second)* emphasises the reading of the work as a time piece, and *Bracket* makes formal connections with Alex Gaites' work *Light Touch* (2020), and with the window frames opposite the work.



MARIE CLEREL

Moving through the gallery in a clockwise direction, the next work displayed on the curved wall is large series of photographs by Marie Clerel, titled, *Midi* (2018). The work is comprised of 365 individual cyanotype prints: one for each day of the year, and all made at midday, giving the work its title.

The cyanotypes vary in tone from bluish-white to deep indigo and are notably paler in the winter and more saturated in the summer months. The quality of the blue relates to the strength of ultraviolet, when the print was exposed. The blues of *Midi* reveal when the sun was shining, but as Clerel has noted, the blues also represent the colour of the sky the prints looked up at during their exposure: on a sunny day the blue of the print is as bright as the sky would be and on a grey day, the colour of the print corresponds.

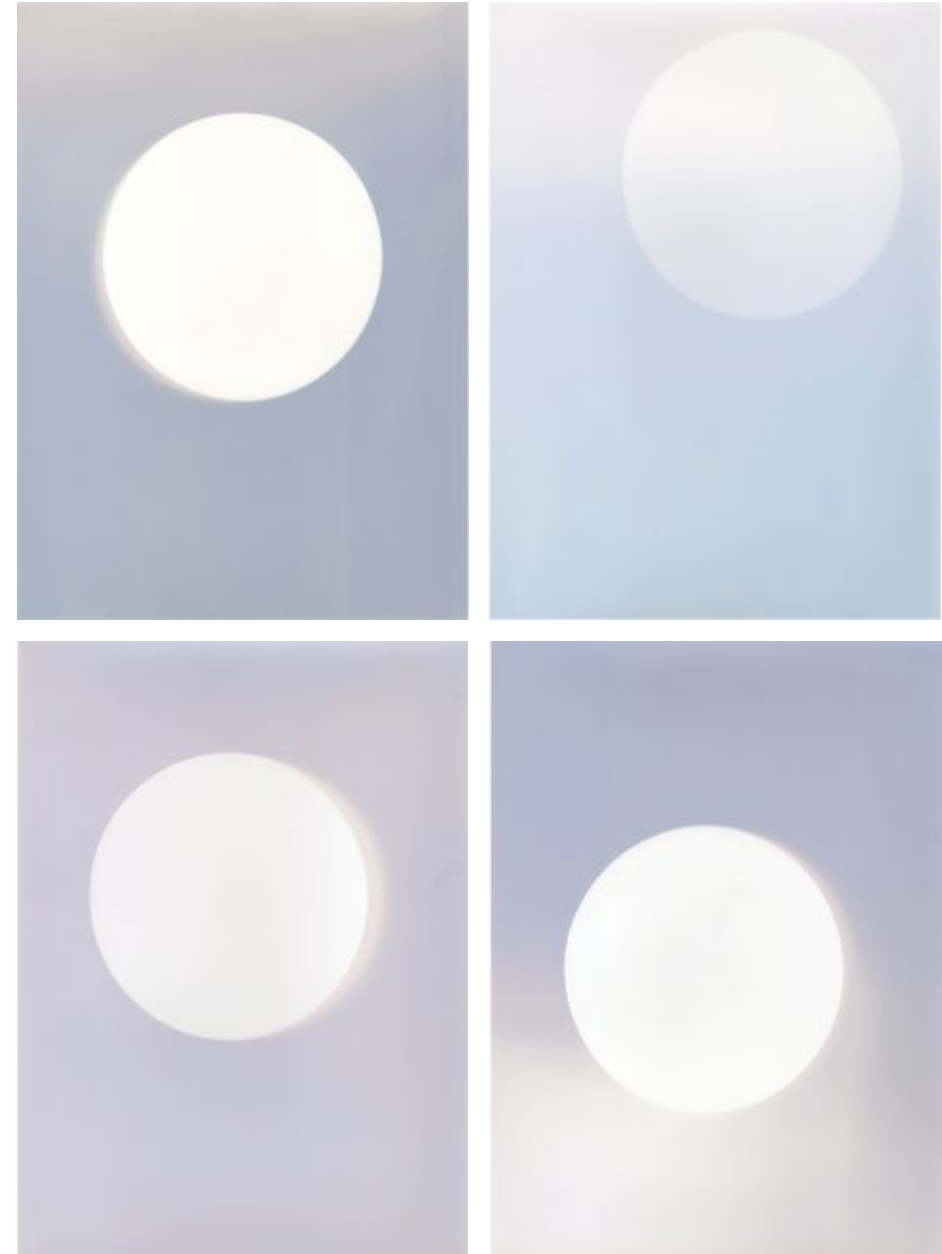
The prints are grouped by month and arranged into rows of seven to represent days of the week. The small photographs are arranged as if they were entries on a wall calendar, but instead of facilitating plans for the future, Clerel's calendar invites the viewer to reflect on the past. The viewer is invited to play a game searching for a blue rectangle that corresponds with a personally significant date in 2018, and to contemplate the representation of that date in relation to the light and weather conditions of Clerel's location versus their own.

Midi is an index of 2018's midday light in both senses of the word: it is the index of 365 indices. That is to say, it is a collection of visual data catalogued for viewing and an indexical representation of its subject – the light at midday. In contrast to Deschenes photograms, Clerel's images are also iconic representations of their subject, as they look like the blue skies they refer to.

Clerel's second work in the exhibition is *Lunaisons*, a series of four moderately sized photograms that depict the supermoon of January 2019 rising and setting. The work was created using the lumen print technique in which photopaper is exposed to light outside of the darkroom and without the use of developer to reveal the image. Instead, with the use of longer exposure times, an image becomes visible and to an extent fixed as light reacts directly with the chemistry suspended in the paper to create colour casts in a range of blue, purple and pink hues.

As with *Midi*, the interaction between viewer, subject and artwork is integral to how the work is read. The process of interpretation relies on the recognition and understanding of what is represented in the first instance, but meaning is only consolidated through the viewer's identification (or otherwise) with the subject (Bruder and Ucek, 2000). Therefore, the viewer provides the artwork with an additional and individualised layer of meaning achieved by looking at the work through the lens of their own history.

Clerel acknowledges the role of viewer agency and reflects on the relationship between experience and memory explored in her work. The cyanotypes and lumen prints are recorded memories, visual documents of what has been, that trigger memories for those who look at them, and in turn generating new experiences and memories. In the case of *Lunaisons*, the viewer is invited to contemplate their own whereabouts at the time of the January 2019 supermoon and the specifics of what they were doing will inform their interpretation of the work.



There are obvious parallels between Deschenes' photograms and *Lunaisons*, in particular the treatment of moonlight as both subject and medium; and like Deschenes, Clerel has referenced experimental photography from the late 19th Century, and in particular to the Celestographs of August Strindberg. In 1894, Strindberg made a series of Celestographs by exposing photo-sensitised plates to the night sky. The resulting abstract images portrayed dark, metallic planes sprayed with golds, blues and reds, reminiscent of a starry night sky.

Further comparisons include the investigation of the materiality of light made explicit through the transformation from source to material representation (a photograph). Both artists utilise indexicality as a means of communication and explore the relationship and merging of media and subject. But there are distinct differences, Deschenes has a purist and concrete approach to making, she facilitates the work, but does not impose on the outcome; she creates the conditions for production, but doesn't anticipate the result. Marie Clerel's work is made through a more negotiated process, she has a specific end-point for the work and a clear intention for how the work should be received.



NANCY HOLT

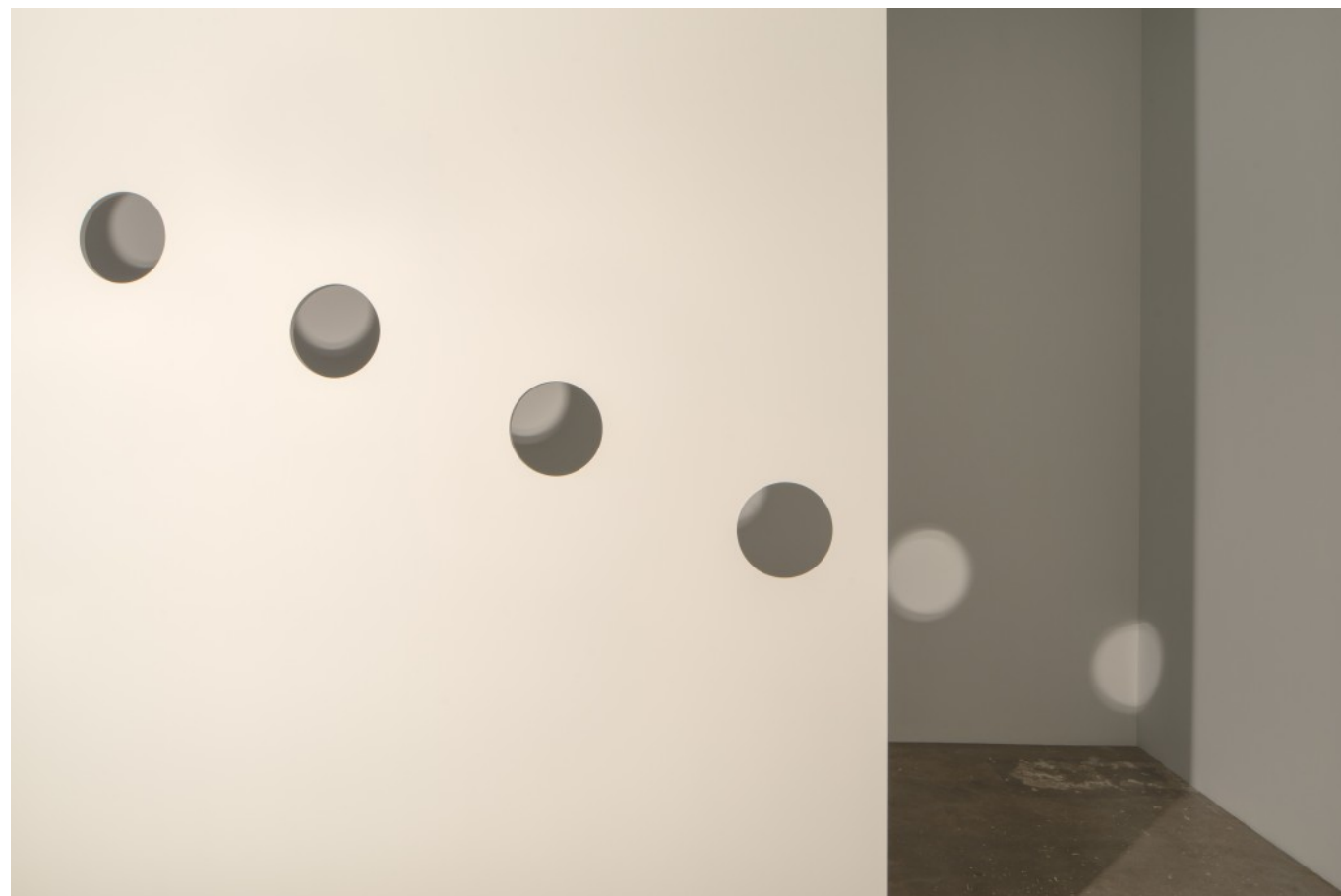
Holes of Light (1973) by Nancy Holt is a self-contained 20x20ft room situated in the centre of the gallery. The installation is partitioned by a wall with eight holes cut in a diagonal line, each 10 inches in diameter. Two lights are mounted either side of the partition wall, which alternate on and off every minute and forty-five seconds, projecting discs of light onto the wall in shadow, whilst faint pencil outlines are located in the corresponding position on the illuminated side of the wall.

Holt is primarily known for her land art works yet in her early career she frequently worked in the fields of concrete poetry, film and photography. At the heart of her practice is a fascination with light, and in observing the world – and beyond – through the properties and capabilities of light. Holt's experiential art works explore themes of visual and spatial perception, of observation and of time. She is repeatedly drawn to circular motifs, which she uses to frame her subjects, but also reference the light sources utilised in her work, such as the stars, moon and sun.

Holt's concrete poem of the same name is included in this catalogue. In the poem, Holt expresses her intention to define space through the casting of light (1973). As the viewer becomes immersed in the slowly blinking light, Holt's intentions are both realised and complicated as the viewer's spatial perception is in constant flux due to the fluctuating lighting conditions. This is complicated further as the viewer chooses how to interact with the work, for example where they choose to stand to view the space and the shape of the shadows they choose to make with their bodies: the viewer inevitably becomes part of the work for the duration of their engagement with it.

Holes of Light is a demonstration of the mechanics and materiality of sight; in Holt's own words, the work represents "light as the concretisation of sight" (1973, pp.1) and makes explicit the correlation between the lineal trajectory of light and the viewer's own line of sight. Holt has essentially invited the viewer to step inside a three-sided, multi-lensed camera obscura (translated from Latin as 'darkened room', which is at least accurate for half of the space at any given time), and so consequently this work is also a demonstration of the inner workings of a camera: light passing through a hole or lens onto a plane. The apertures of this camera are too large to focus an image but the sharpness of the illuminated crescents, reminiscent of a solar eclipse or the passing phases of the moon, increases toward the centre of the wall.

Holt's second work in the exhibition is essentially a photographic recording of the action of her first. *Light and Shadow Photo Drawings* (1978) is a series of eighteen photographs Holt made by passing light through circular cut-outs onto photo-sensitive paper creating abstract images of crescents, ellipses and arcs. Whereas *Holes of Light* presents 'light as the concretisation of sight', *Light and Shadow Photo Drawings* present the concretisation of light itself: they give materiality to the transient beams of light cast in the installation. Holt's decision to name the works 'drawings' instead of photographs directs the viewer to move away from a semiotic reading of the work to a purely formal one (Holt Smithsonian Foundation, n.d). As images that point only to the process of their making, these photographs exemplify the sensibilities of concrete photography. Nevertheless, in the context of Holt's practice, the familiarity of the shapes evoke thoughts of celestial objects and the passing of time.





Holes of Light, 1973

1. Concrete vs. Ephemeral

Light, like sight, can be channeled, controlled so that shapes of light can materialize. In Holes of Light these shapes of contained light were outlined on the wall in pencil giving them even more of a physical presence, so that even when the light or sight is absent, a trace remains.

2. Light as the Concretization of Sight

It was once believed that sight emanated from the eyes and was cast out onto the world; that it somehow touched the things seen. Eye sockets were holes in the head for the emanation of light. When working with my locators, and demarcating areas of vision caused by the channeling of sight, I often wished I had a small, strong light to place in the end of the tube in the position of my eye. I could have then easily traced the zone of light on the wall without having to repeatedly look through the pipe. With Locator with Spotlight and Sunlight I discovered that a spotlight made the same shape on the wall as my sight through a locator when the spotlight was placed at the same distance, height and angle from the wall. With Holes of Light, if I could have put my eyes where the light fixture was, then the rounded shapes of light on the gallery wall, formed by the light shining through the holes in the center wall, would have been what I saw. In other words, the pattern of cast light and one's sight were analogous.

3. Siting Light Circles Through Holes

Three of the circular holes are low enough to look through. When you line up a circle of light through one of these holes, it is not the circle of light being cast by the hole being looked through that is seen, but rather it is the circle of light being cast by an adjacent hole. When one tries to see the circle of light cast by the hole being looked through, the shadow of one's own head appears on the wall instead.

4. Light vs. Dark (Shadow)

The room is divided into two equal parts alternately light and dark. An electric timer turns one of two opposing 650-watt quartz lights on, and the other one off, every one minute and forty-five seconds. When the light is shining through the holes, the holes appear dark and the central wall appears light. When the wall is dark, the holes are light. Thus the walls of the room divide into light zones and shadow zones. The central wall casts a shadow twice its length.

5. Changes in Penumbra

There is a gradual increase in gradation of the edge of the shadow, the penumbra, around the light shapes cast through the holes, the more distant the cast light is from the holes. Consequently with each shape of light it was necessary to choose which penumbra gradation would be accentuated by the pencil outline.

6. Formation of Crescents

Shadow crescents appear when the circles of light are seen through all eight holes at once. If one stands against the room wall, one circle of light can be seen filling a circular hole, but the rest will be partially seen, causing dark crescents of graduating sizes to be visible. A crescent also can be made by placing one's head in a circular hole, causing the light on the wall to surround the shadow of the head in a crescent-like way.

7. Differences in Circle Sizes

The circular holes are half the size of the twenty-inch circles of light. The room is twenty feet wide; the central wall is ten feet away from each wall of the room. Thus, the light spread about one inch per foot.

8. Definition of Space through the Casting of Light

The diagonal placement of the eight circles of light—going from the top to the bottom of the room—and the bisection of two end circles of light in two corners of the room bring attention to the overall height and length of the room.

ALEX GAITES

It's About Time (2020) is a twenty-four minute film by Alex Gaites of a revolving sea and sky and was made over a twenty-four hour period on the longest day of the year. The film is projected onto the wall directly opposite the door of the gallery and is the first work on display inside the gallery.

The circular frame and rotating horizon reference a clock face, with the horizon functioning as the hour hand. The film begins at midnight on 20th June 2020, with the horizon at 00:00, and finishes at 23:59, after the horizon line has completed two rotations. The film accelerates time, transforming twenty-four hours into twenty-four minutes, but there is no sense of urgency as the accompanying sound of breaking waves is in real time.

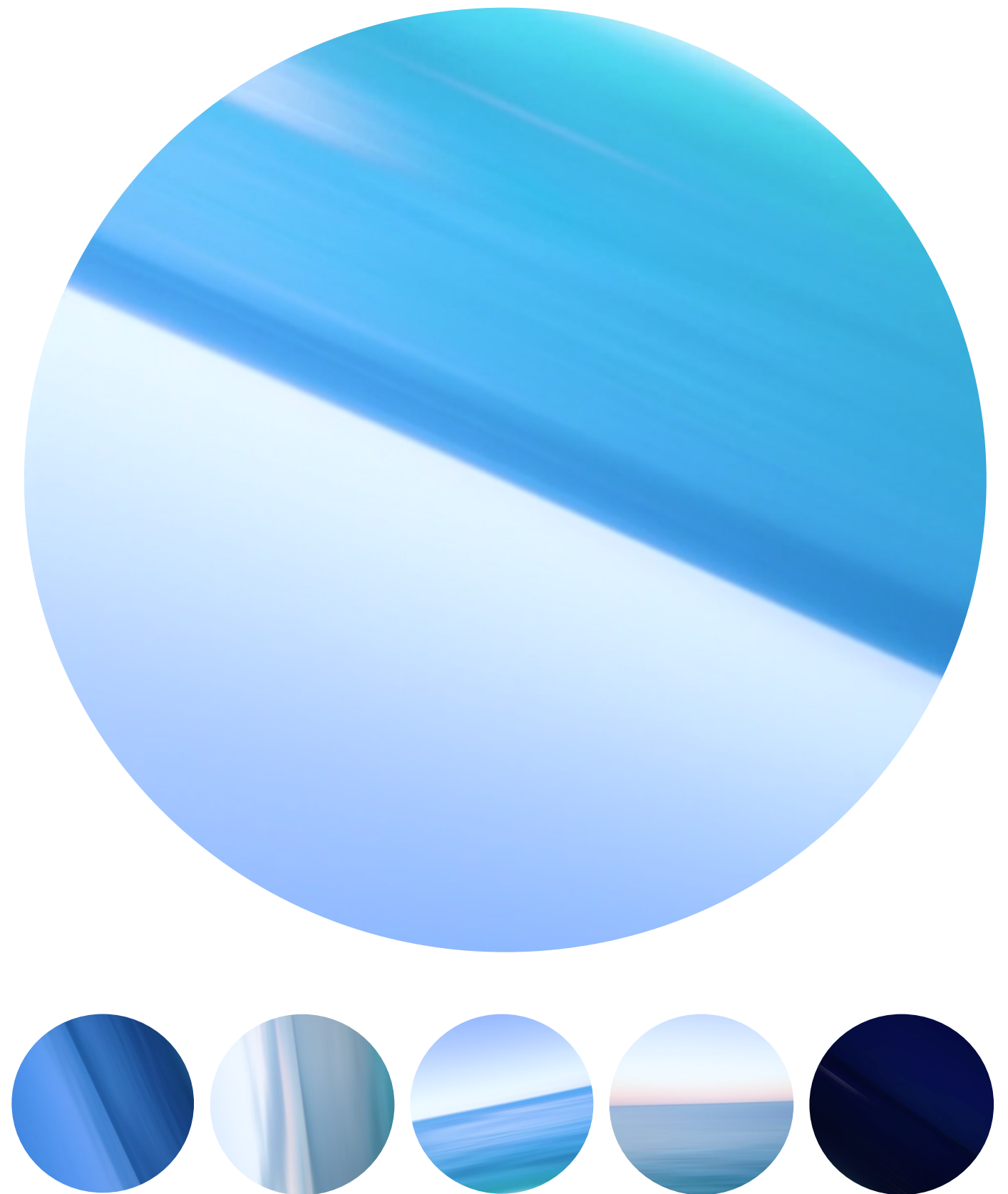
Gaites plays with the viewer's perception of time by juxtaposing two contradictory time frames in the film. The lack of contextual information combined with the porthole framing provides no clues for the viewer to decipher the location. Instead, Gaites only reveals that the location is of personal significance, and that the film, made during the Covid-19 UK lockdown, was a means to recalling the unique quality of light in that place (2020). The intention being to share the experience of responding to the effect of that light source hitting the retina. Comparisons can be made to Clerel's *Midi*, as both works point, indexically, to the light of a specific time and location.

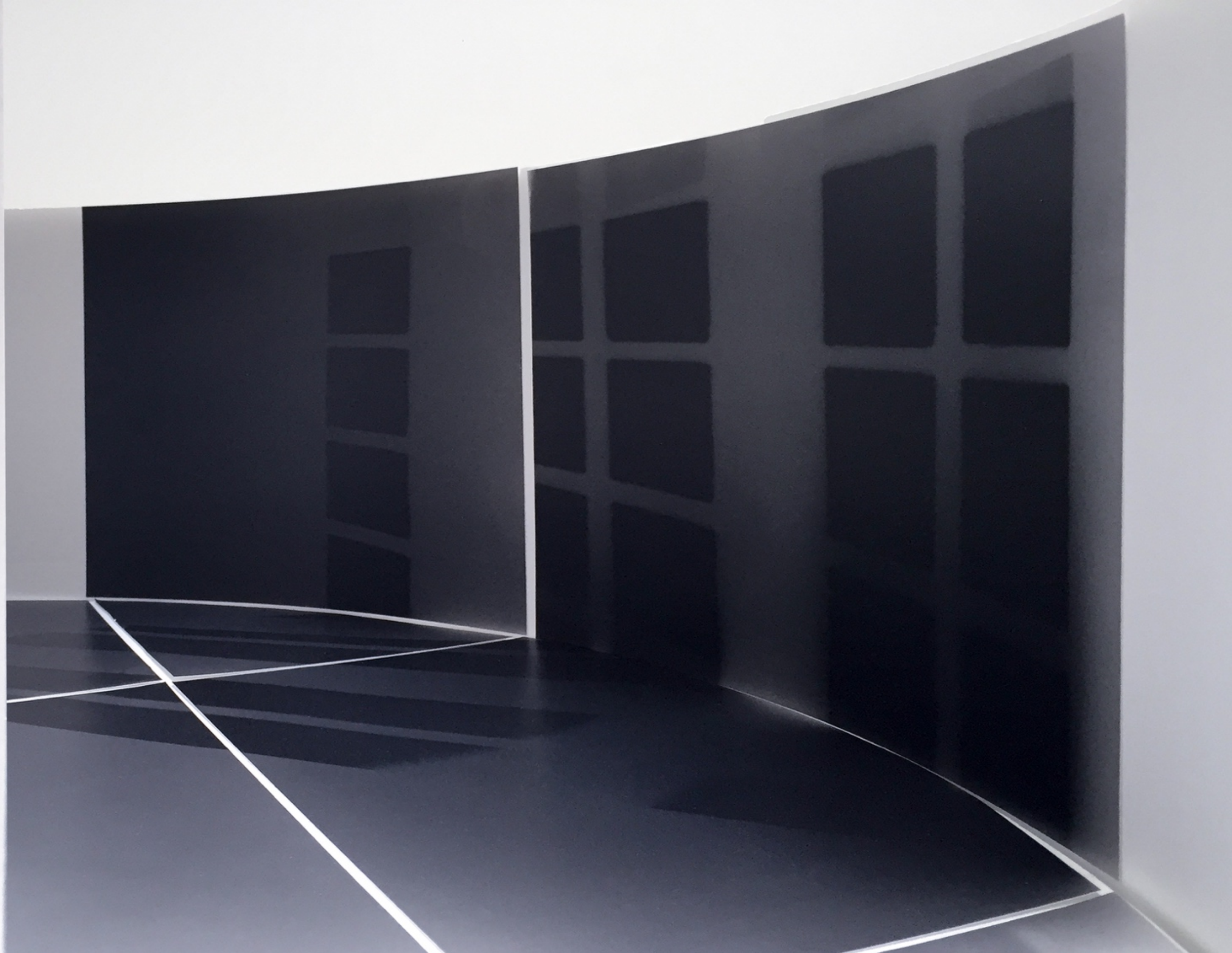
Gaites' second work in the exhibition, *Light Touch* (2020,) also bears a relationship with *Midi*. The giant, two-part photogram, was exposed at noon in the gallery, fixing the light that shone through the windows to cast soft geometric shapes on the floor and walls of the space. Gaites shares Holt's intention to define a space through the casting of light (Holt, 1973), but preserves the affect in the light-sensitive surface she has applied to the floor and wall.

The work plays on photography's relationship with positive and negative. The photogram depicts the light cast into the space in negative and so is dark in tone, yet it is located in the brightest part of the gallery. The viewer's perception of the space is disrupted as they move through the gallery. Starting in the lowest lit area where the floor is white and reflective due to the sheen on the surface of the photopaper, the viewer walks toward the brightest area of the gallery, but as they do the floor gets darker, affecting their ability to sense the available light.

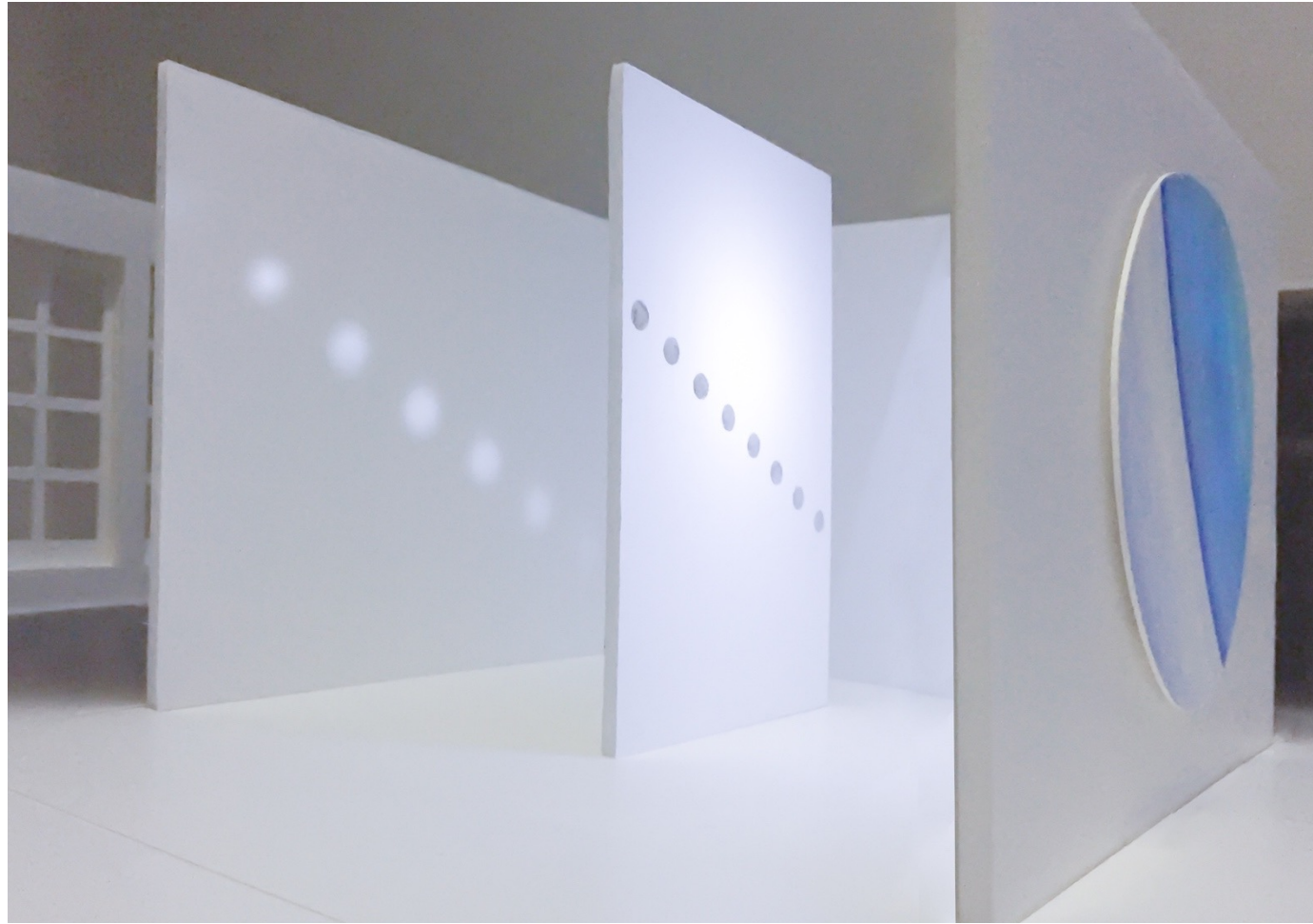
As with many of the other works in the exhibition, the interaction between audience and art work is key in the construction of meaning for *Light Touch*. The viewer is physically connected to the work because they have to walk on it, and may leave indexical traces of their presence on the surface. A unique opportunity arises at noon each day where the viewer can observe the aligning of the beams of light coming through the window and the dark bands on the floor and wall. They may choose to cast their own shadows into those shapes, disrupting the alignment of light and becoming a part of the work, momentarily.

Gaites' practice is primarily concerned with investigating the concept of haptic vision, that is the perception of touch in response to a visual stimulus. This is achieved through her use of materials that rely on contact between light and a light-sensitive surface to produce an image. Her work often directly addresses the passing of time, as it does in *It's About Time*, but she also explores time more subtly through the process of making or displaying work. Gaites has located her practice in relation to concrete photography, however she has more recently incorporated architectural elements into her work, thus providing the viewer with a referent and moving away from a purist position.





AFTERWORD



Seeing is Feeling was originally conceived in 2019 as a means to explore the concepts of indexicality, materiality and haptic vision through a selection of artists' work that address these themes. At the time of conception, the exhibition was framed by the movement in contemporary photography toward historical and experimental techniques explored by artists such as Walead Beshty, Barbara Kasten and Mariah Robertson.

This development has been explored by a number of writers and curators in the last decade with increasing regularity. In 2014, Carol Squiers curated *What is a Photograph?* at the International Centre of Photography in New York, the exhibition invited audiences to consider how artists were reimagining analogue photography in relation to the exponential progress of digital imaging (Squiers, 2014). A year later, Charlotte Cotton published *Photography is Magic*, a survey of Post-Internet photography practice engaged with the material potential of photography explored through both analogue and digital techniques. More recently, Kim Knoppers curated *Back to the Future* at Foam in Amsterdam in 2018, where she made comparisons between the freedom and experimentation of 19th Century photography and the current non-conformist position of emerging photographic art practice. Key features of the work shared in these exhibitions and publications included the relationship between the materiality of photography, the communication of meaning through indexical signs and the resurgence of historical processes.



Seeing is Feeling was to build on that line of inquiry by turning attention to art practice that brings to the fore the haptic experience of looking with reference to photographic and light-based art works. The relationship between seeing and feeling was (and is) fundamental to the reading of the individual works and the exhibition as a whole, and could only be fully realised by standing in the space, looking directly at the work, and the ability to move around and interact with it.

But, as of March 2020, as plans for exhibition were taking shape, a nationwide lockdown was announced in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. The implications were that this exhibition would not be seen in person and would instead be viewed on screen, impacting on the opportunities to observe the materiality of the work, to receive the indexically communicated waves of light reflected from the original source or subject, and to transform that experience into a haptic response - to feel the meaning of the work as well as to see it.

As well as influencing how the exhibition will be received, the changes to our lives as result of lockdown and social distancing will inevitably affect how the themes of this show are interpreted. We are now hyper-aware of touch, of how much we miss physical contact with those around us and of the dangers touch now presents. Whilst the original intentions of *Seeing is Feeling* may not be realised, this exhibition will contribute to the emerging narrative of art in the time of the Covid-19 pandemic.

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