

A Bright Haunting

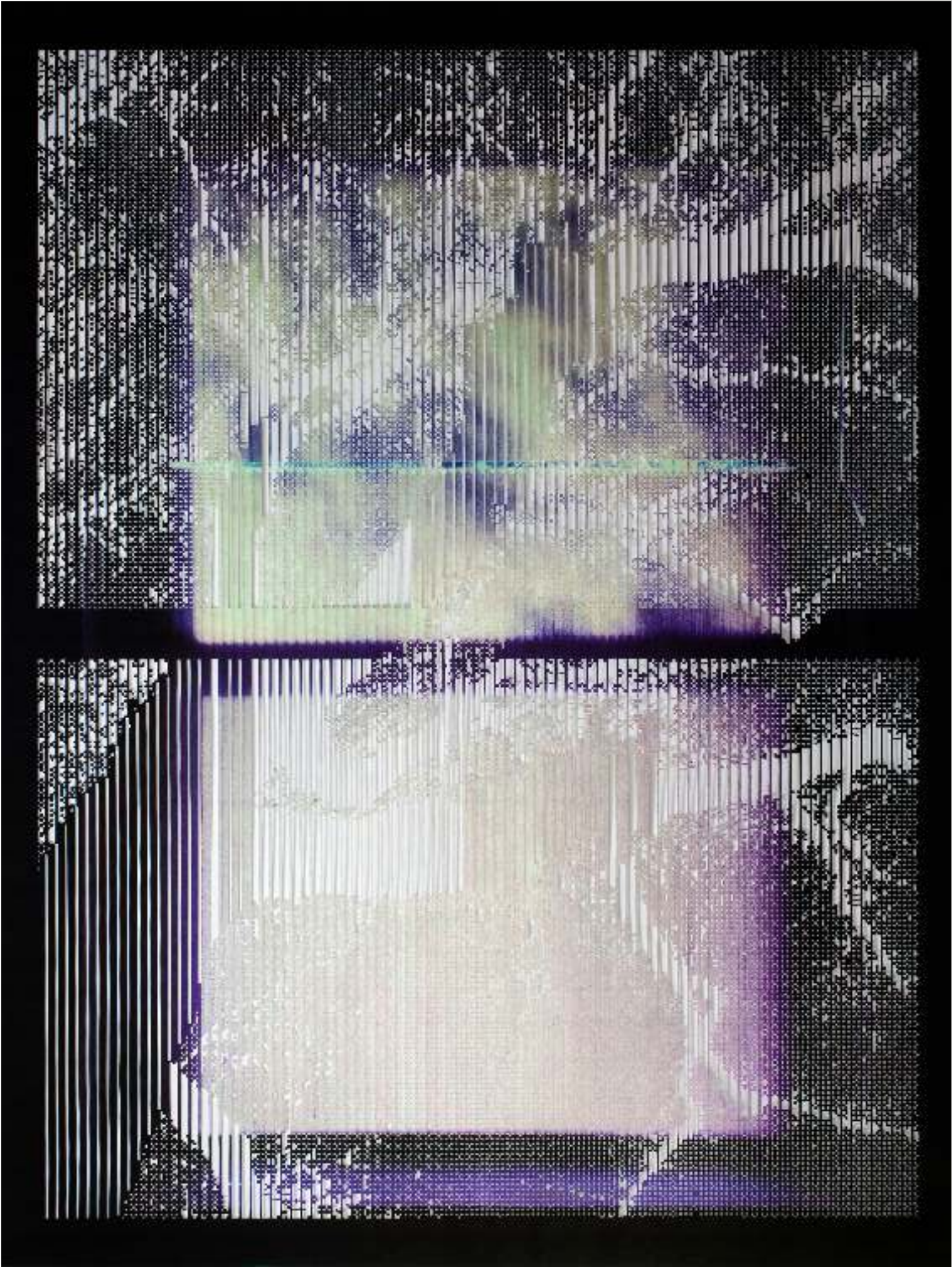


Caroline Jane Harris

A Bright Haunting

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Liquid Light, 2018
Hand-cut archival pigment print, 102 x 130 cm



Bright Hauntings

by **Jon K Shaw**

The clear sky has leant against the wall.

It's like a prayer to the emptiness.

And the emptiness turns its face to us

and whispers

“I am not empty, I am open.”

— Tomas Tranströmer

From its earliest days, photography has tied and retied the knots of its dual abilities of bearing witness and revealing the unseen. Eadweard Muybridge's famous photographs of “Sallie Gardner” at a gallop revealed material facts about the gait of the horse that were too quick for the naked eye to ascertain. But the truth-telling capacities of the apparatus and its related processes – and their relation to the unseen – were equally open to manipulation: six years earlier, in 1872, William H. Mumler photographed former first lady Mary Todd Lincoln with her long-dead husband, Abraham, appearing ghostly and benign behind her. The technical knowledge of the time was insufficient to fathom Mumler's techniques, and he was acquitted of the charges of fraud which his “spirit photography” invited. Years later, Mumler developed another photographic printing technique which proved instrumental in allowing captured images to be printed in newspapers as-taken, without first having to be copied onto a plate by a draughtsman. In doing so, Mumler heralded in a world in which full immersion in images became the ethereal substance of daily reality. Spin forward nearly a century, and as Guy Debord recognised in his 1967 book *Society of the Spectacle*, twentieth century life had come to be constituted and organised first and foremost by the production, circulation and consumption of images.

Today, whilst photographic documentation is still accorded testimonial value in a court of law, outside of the courtroom photography has accelerated our vertiginal

slide into a world of malleable facticity: what we have come to call the era of “post truth”. The two notorious highlights of Mumler's career, then, have crashed together in our present: the photographic image persists as a medium which can be circulated to testify to an event and influence opinion, whilst simultaneously it is universally understood that, at every stage from the moment of the image's creation, it is entirely manipulable (if, indeed, it isn't outright synthetic, with no indexical link to anything in the so-called “real world”). This is the very core of the post-truth paradigm: apparent facts no longer afford us a solid, inert bedrock on which to build, but are somehow fundamentally negotiable, malleable – they are formed as much as they are forming, effects as much as causes. Post-truth images in particular, circulating at lightspeed, are vulnerable to what has been called “attribution decay”, a sort of epistemological pornography in which images are decontextualized and their authorial origins become untraceable; histories are obscured in seconds under long tangles of retweets, retumbles, re-pins.¹

—— *Impoverished Images*

In this image economy devoid of historical traceability, in which our vision occupies a depthless present, both our photographic apparatus and the very substance of images come to be determined by the demand that they be portable, light, optimised for speed – if necessary at the cost of resolution, detail, clarity. For over a decade now, the vicissitudes of circulation have moulded digital photographs into what artist Hito Steyerl calls “poor images”. She explains, “The poor image is a rag or a rip; an AVI or a JPEG [...]. The poor image has been uploaded, downloaded, shared, reformatted, and reedited. It transforms quality into accessibility.”² For Steyerl, these poor images must be defended, celebrated even, not despised for being mere “lumpen proletarian[s]” in a hierarchy ordered on megapixel counts, lens-glass coating standards and slickness of postproduction – after all, being “ranked and valued according to resolution” is not the only measure of a photograph.³ Certainly, metrics of refinement need bear no correlation to a work's affective charge or ethico-political efficacy, a truth affirmed by the clattering drums, cack-handed guitars, rough yells and gritty squeals of punk, and known at least since the beginnings of Jean Dubuffet's collection of Art brut.

Caroline Jane Harris works with poor images. But these images have not become poor only through the imperatives of a breakneck network society, by the demands, bottlenecks and abuses of circulation. Rather, her images are manipulated

into a poorer state, wilfully “impoverished”, we might say, as both a critical and aestheticising operation. These are quotidian, almost generic images – water, windows, trees and sky – shot through the cheap component lenses of iPhone camera modules, blown up and printed on dying consumer peripherals, then rephotographed and digitally processed. Contrasts are ramped up, colour values pushed to extremes, scales shrunk and distended, filetypes are changed from jpeg to bitmap, or, as in the *Monolith* triptych (2017–18), stills are screen-grabbed from video footage. But Harris is not wildly dissolving her images into the monstrously joyful digital liquidity of the datamosher. On the contrary, rather than celebrating a naïve cyberfuturism, Harris’ photoshop manipulations open up a process of making visible the images’ hidden, constitutive digitality. From there, she is able to explore the ways in which – despite our habitual engagements, and despite the slick, seamless surfaces of high-spec fine art pigment prints she employs – the image as both visual object and digital artefact is fundamentally tangible. Against the accelerating, liquidising tendencies of our times, here the impoverishing violence done to the image slows it down, brings it closer to us and us closer to it, such that the digital image is made more materially present, more palpably real.

———*Thin, Orphan Images*

All digital images are composite images. This no longer means that they are sophisticated collages, of a kind with Yves Klein’s *Leap into the Void* (1960), in which his trusty team of judo chums are spliced out of the heroic individual’s launch into unknown space, their safe, welcoming arms seamlessly disappeared. Rather, digital composite images are as much a product of their digital manipulation – their postproduction – as they are of the moment they were captured. As Evan Calder Williams has observed in relation to cinema, composite images neither indexically capture scenes and events that have happened “out there” in the world, nor do they ostentatiously celebrate – or even reveal – the digital manipulations that they have undergone “in there” in the virtual.⁴ If the contrary had ever been the case, we can certainly no longer clearly discern between the image as a window onto the world and as a window onto the digital-virtual: postproduction can naturalise itself within the indexical snap (masquerading as an original element of the photographed scene), or actual and virtual may become one on – or as – the very surface of the image (an image under whose sleekness the material substrate of the print disappears). In either case, the historical order in which the composite image has come about and been processed is obscured, just as its many layers are collapsed



Monolith I, 2017–2018
Archival Kozo pigment print embossed with hand-cut stencil, 111.5 x 66 cm

into one, laminate surface. Accordingly, any determination of the image's testimonial veracity is held in suspension by the impossibility of parsing its actual, indexical elements from its digital-virtual ones. The difference between the two is as invisible to the naked eye as the gait of Leland Stanford's mare was without Muybridge's zoopraxiscope. In front of such images, we find ourselves paralysed by an ambiguity which defines our age of inertia and cancelled futures, suspended short of the moment when distinctions might be made, withheld from any event of differentiation in a distended, vertiginal present.

Crucially, this unparsable actual-virtual now structures all images that have undergone postproduction: not only those with CGI augmentations and photoshopped tanlines, but anything which has been tweaked, cropped, resized, smoothed, layered, dodged and burned, gradient-corrected, encoded, reformatted or compressed – which is to say, any image which has been captured digitally or opened in an image-editing application. Whilst each image will certainly differ in terms of where its apparatus and postproduction ends up placing it on Steyerl's hierarchy of aesthetic refinement, it is uniformly the case that ties between the image and the world *and* between the image and its production history have been worn to the point of severing: any archaeological delamination of the photograph's digital and historical layers is rendered speculative at best, if not impossible. With the temporal depth of the image thus effaced, we scratch at the surface to find only a collision of absences: the absence of an indexical correlate to the world of events and the absence of any definitive traces of avowed acts of artistic labour. The historical depths of the photographs as memory and as craft are lost on the purely superficial surface of the composite image. It is radically unclear, in this permanent, synthetic now, what has taken place, how and when.

— *The Cut and the Thickness*

In her work, Harris presents us with a careful unearthing of both the materiality and digital archaeology of her images. In doing so, she not only affirms the relative autonomy of each regime – their formal differentiability – but also shows the lineaments of their co-constitutive entanglement. The decomposing or delaminating which she undertakes allows for the reintegration of image, matter and the digital on another, more lucid level.

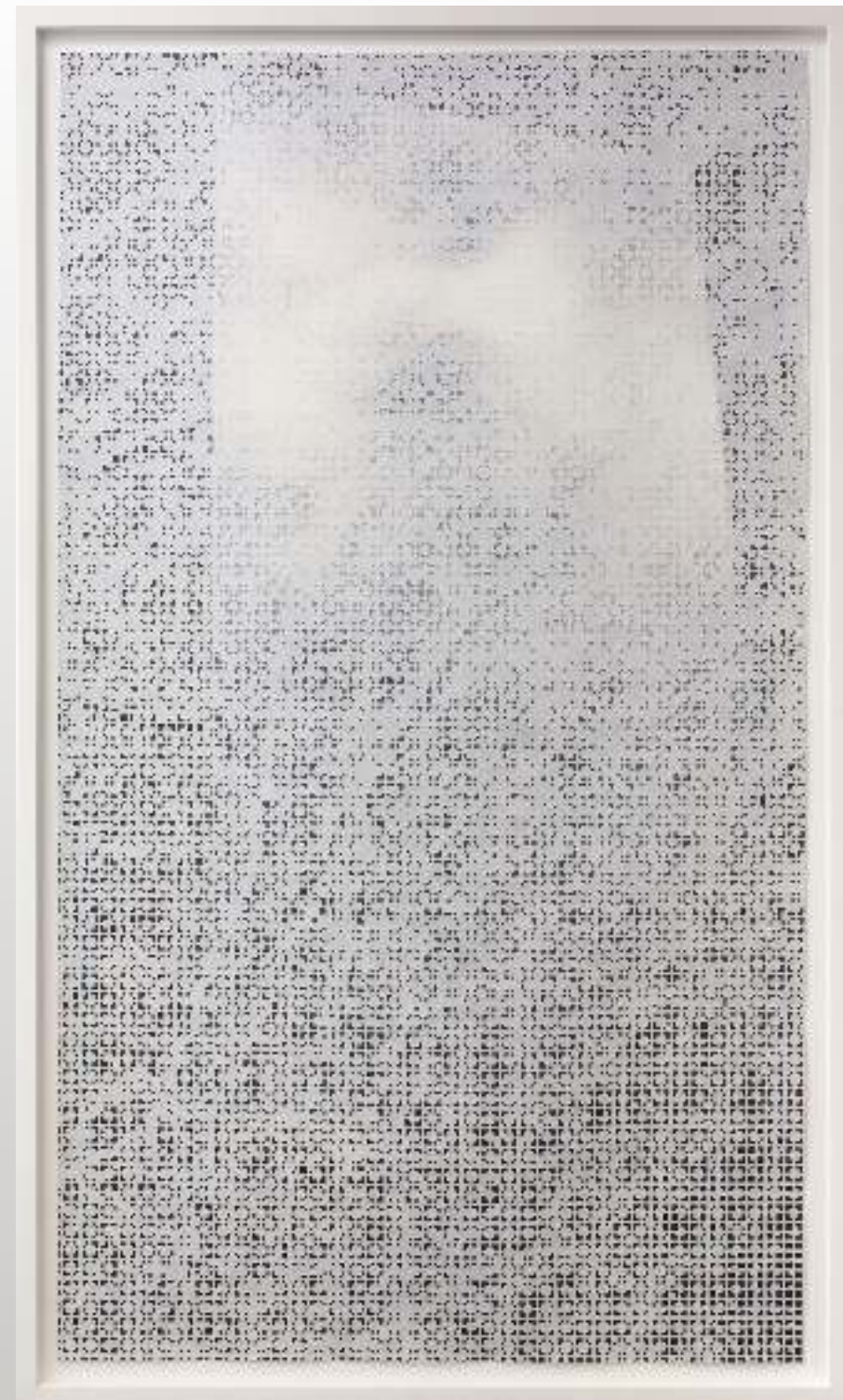


Monolith II, 2017–2018
Ruled pencil rubbing on archival Kozo pigment print, 111.5 x 66 cm

It could seem odd to have initiated a discussion of Harris' art as if hers were a solely or primarily photographic practice. When we first look on her work, we tend to immediately see not what is there, but what is not there: what most distinguishes Harris' artistic practice is the meticulous removal of matter, the painstaking scalpelting out of each digitally-printed, pixelated mark that her impoverishment of the image has brought to the surface from its digital-virtual depths. Once we see past the sheer scale and precision of the labour involved, here, it is the materiality of the artwork itself which is affirmed: through revealing the thickness of the cut paper on which the smooth, matte pigment prints sit, and by allowing fragile, unmoored tapers of paper to swoon into the space in front of the paper-plane, Harris fosters the reappearance of the substrate as a tangible presence, and encourages materiality *per se* to assert itself alongside the digital and the image as a co-constitutive regime.

This accent on the substrate certainly appeared as a formal concern in modern painting – in Bonnard's works on cardboard, for example, in which the paint has soaked into the substrate rather than coating or resurfacing it; or, as Michel Foucault observed, in the visual cues of alternating horizontals and verticals by which Manet draws attention to the canvas' warp and weft (in *Argenteuil* (1874) in particular).⁵ But, as I have been arguing, whilst there is doubtless a light beauty and exquisiteness to these pieces, the formal concerns of Harris' work are not solely about aestheticisation and virtuosity of craft, nor do they attempt to revive art-historical fundamentalist rhetoric on teleological flatness. Rather, they are considered reflections on what structures contemporary experience and consciousness – in particular the rapidity and grain of image economy and the flattening of interaction onto the screen – as well as what might yet exceed capture by this leviathan. Whilst Harris' work is not didactically political, her insistence on the materiality which transects digital history might encourage us to consider the quotidian dysphoria of inhabiting a body in a world of digital image flow, as well as quietly reminding us of the global geophysical and human-rights concerns associated with the technologies which produce, distribute and store these images – from cheap lenses, cheap storage, accelerated digital distribution channels and ever-smarter editing logarithms running on ever-smaller chips.

The meticulous excavations of surface which Harris practices, and which result in such delicate, friable works, thus invite us to think anew about the materials which make up these image-compositing technologies – all the more so when a work patterns copper with a rectilinear filigree redolent of printed circuit board



Monolith III, 2017–2018
Hand-cut chine collé Kozo pigment print, 111.5 x 66 cm

Hard Copy (Virtual Window), 2017
Etched copper from hand-cut stencil, 93.5 x 124cm



(as in *Hard Copy (Virtual Window)* and *Hard Copy (Shroud)* (both 2018)), or explicitly takes on the aspect ratio of an iPhone screen (as in the *Monolith* triptych (2017–18)). Six people driven to stealing copper died in the UK in 2011 alone, and recent amendments to the Metal Theft Act may have reduced deaths, but serious injuries sustained in dangerous wire-stripping have increased. Further afield, mining for rare earth minerals used in mobile phones, such as the coltan distributed across Democratic Republic of Congo, transforms the farmed planes and forested mountains into stark porous hells into which boys, often as young as twelve, are fed. We are familiar with – and even, despite ourselves, inured to – the widespread images of these children, peering out of holes, naked torsos dusted in grey smut, cheap torches strapped awkwardly to their heads, their long days of labour overseen by Rwandan militiamen cradling sub-machine guns. Perhaps we do not mistrust such images – though, like any circulating photograph, they are subject to retouching and attribution decay, and are open to exploitation by myriad, incompatible agendas. But credulous and sincere as we may be, we move on from any image: over the page, across the broadcast frequencies, down the timeline. In this miasma of compound, flowing images, shocks are quickly dissipated, urgency depoliticises into pathos and is prodigiously scattered to the wind. Whatever the gravity of what they depict, images do not weigh on us: they are intangible in themselves, and they can only gesture at what is unseen.

The insistent presence of materiality in Harris' work offers something different. Her works anchor images whilst simultaneously revealing the image's incompleteness, uncovering its holes, its reverse, its virtual spaces and its actual thickness. Here, it is the process of first making the unseen tangible that makes it visible: through delicacy and quiet violence and meticulousness and the confounded, vertiginous depths of actual absent matter – of real holes – we see the image stretch out in all its virtual and material dimensions, across our world of surfaces and beyond it. This is the deeply humane side of Harris' work – she does not turn her back on the deep complexities of the present, does not retreat into a garret of contemplation and the blind repetition of mere craftsmanship; rather, she takes us, with a light but inexorable determination, into the myriad depths which images both open up and obscure. What we find there is both peace and urgency; but also, I would venture, the means with which to act, cutting across material, digital and ocular historical contingency.

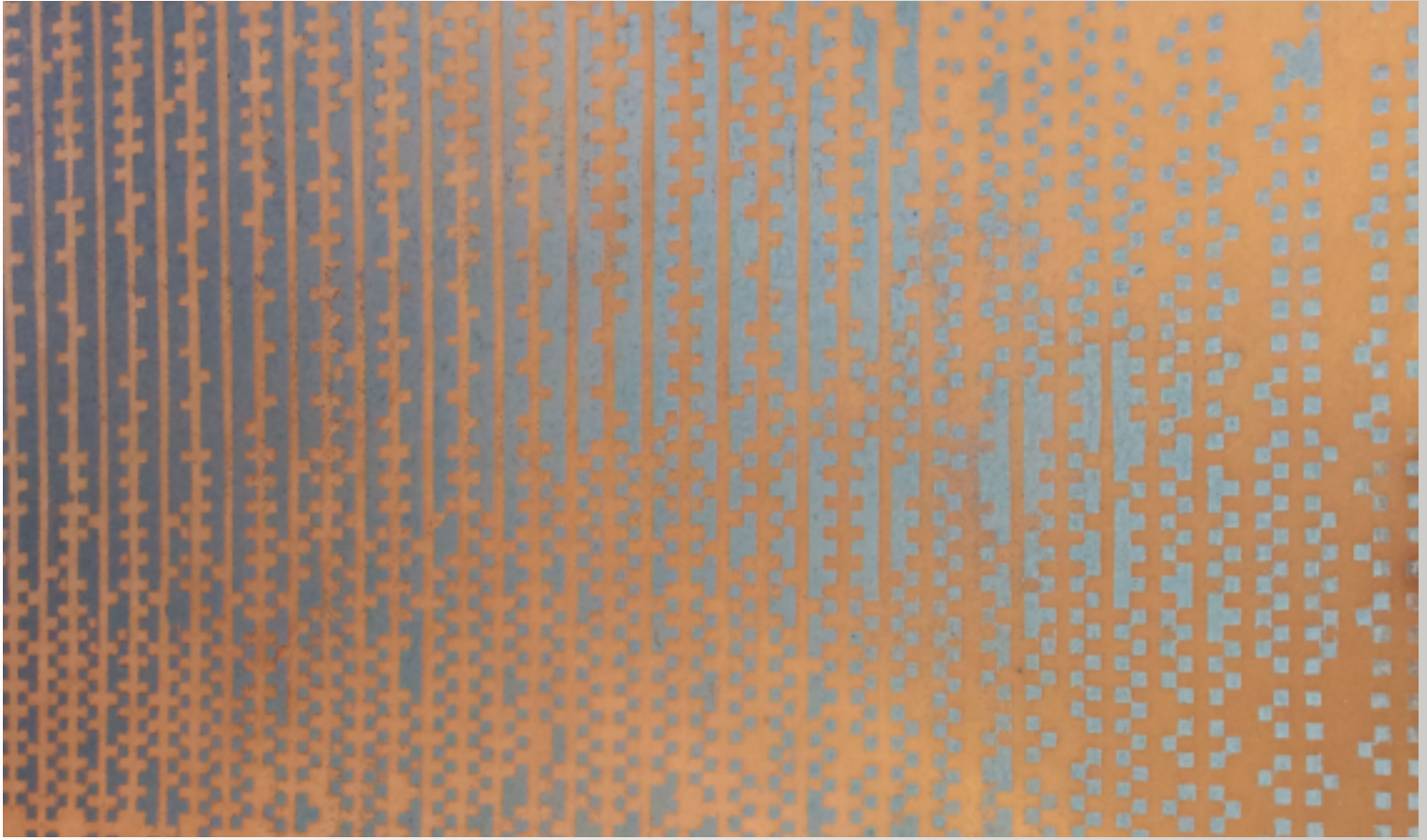
—— *Outsights and Laminate Dimensions*

If materialising the image and/as data can be said to have political resonance beyond the quiet, non-didactic subjects of Harris' images – not least because of its insistence on historicity and material presence – there is also a reinvention of the image, and the virtual image, as an almost utopian opening onto a beyond that is not overdetermined by the conditions of the present and which is intensive rather than extensive in its glowing non-spatiality. Beyond formal and art-historical insights, we are invited to what Justin Barton calls "outsights", understood in this context as simultaneous contact with material realities and maximal abstraction, worldly beyond reason.⁶

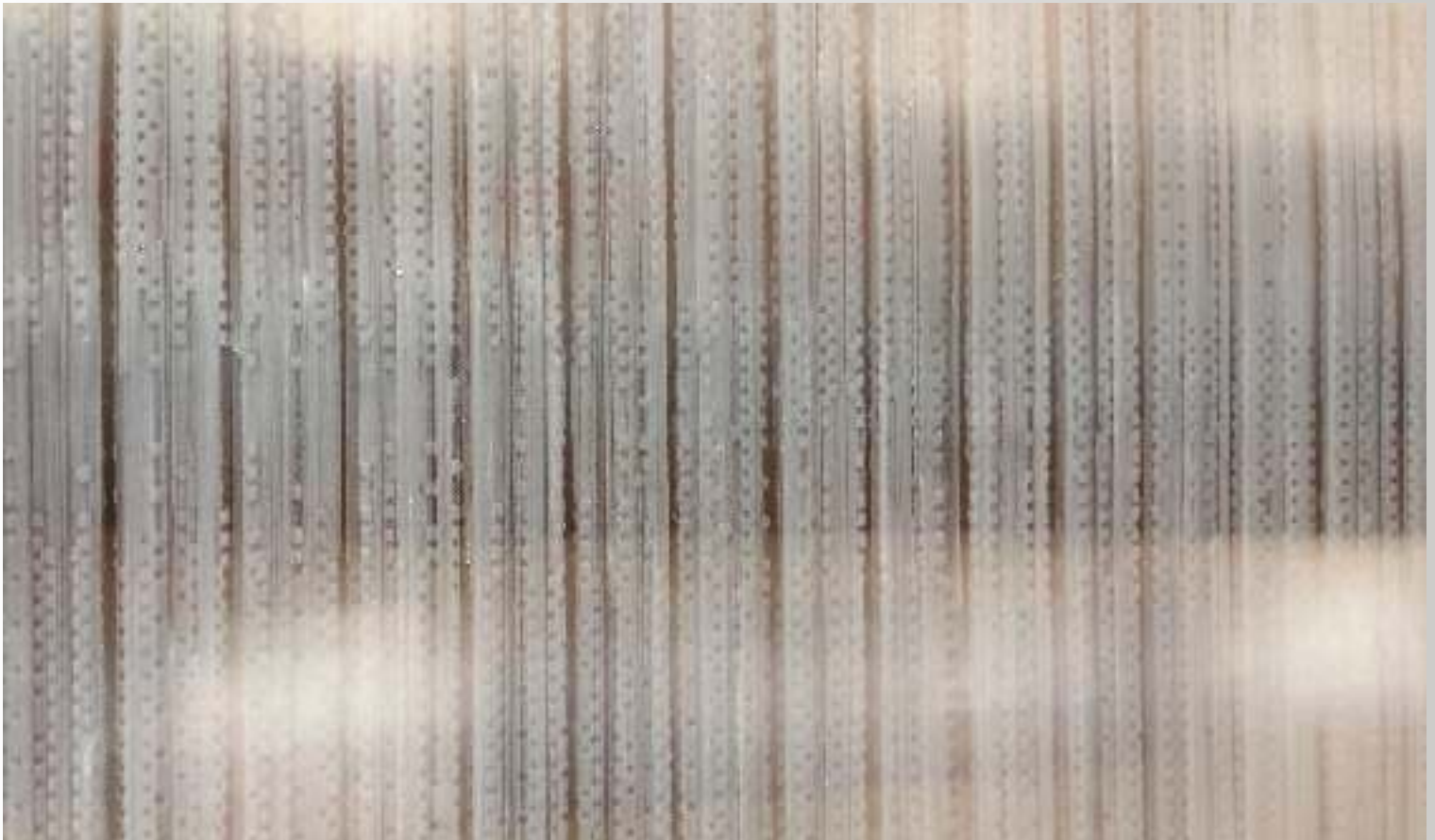
One way in which this initially manifests is as an affect brought on by the contradictory planes with which we are presented. Both within the images and between the images and ourselves, Harris produces dysphoric torsion: images originally captured from a standing position are printed and rephotographed flat – as in the *Seeing the Light* (2017) – with the secondary patterns of cut-out light on the print weaving a playful eeriness through the shadows around the photographed subject; and images that gaze up into the firmament are hung at eye level on gallery walls for us to stand in front of (*Shroud* (2018)). These internal and external superpositionings of horizontal and vertical planes has the same virtualising effect on the viewer as Michael Kubovy found in some Renaissance paintings. Mantegna especially, for Kubovy, composed his perspectives in such a way that the resultant "discrepancy between the spectator's actual point of view and the point of view from which the scene is felt to be viewed" would open onto no less than "a spiritual experience that cannot be obtained by any other means."⁷

If seeing Harris' work is always to see an image's virtual depths pitting and spread across its flatness, it is also to always be looking simultaneously up or down as well as out and through, such that our haptic and visual spatial perceptions cease to be in accord with one another. There are windows laminated with floors, here, and – such as in *Shroud* (2018) – doors opening up into leafy canopies and wide blue skies. This latter work is as serene as it is unsettling, as we stand, very much alive, looking up from the grave – a *memento mori* in which we are both Abraham Lincoln and his wife, haunter and haunted. Indeed, we might identify this strange affect of our bodies being both horizontal and vertical – this out-of-body or spiritual experience – as a spatial expression of the hauntological character

Hard Copy (Shroud) - Detail, 2018
Etched and inked copper from hand-cut stencil, 112 x 82 cm



Thresholds - Detail, 2018
Ruled pencil rubbing on archival pigment print mounted on aluminium, 150 x 100 cm



of our contemporary selves. Like us, the works hung on the walls are constituted by a certain indecision between presence and absence, complete by dint of their being materially and virtually ambiguous: flat and deep, material and holey, vertical and horizontal. What haunts Harris' cut pieces is not only the absent shards of paper – their absence testifying to the labour of the artist, the hand once at work, here; it is equally the image that is haunted, haunted by an other place which it both screens off and opens onto. Although the pictorial image *per se* partakes of an ambiguity – in that it simultaneously has virtual depth and material flatness – Harris' works in particular capture, manipulate and exacerbate ambiguities of this kind. Her repeated use of windows already evoked this sinusoidal draw and denial of depth and flatness, and the introduction of the motifs of curtains (*Thresholds* (2018)) and venetian blinds (*Liquid Light* (2018)) thickens the veiling of the outside, reciprocally increasing its allure. At the same time, the digital and other processual impoverishments of the source image in *Liquid Light* (2018) have caused purples and greens to spread past the containing window frame and seep across to “our” side of the blinds. The cut-out of a pixelated tree which overlays and undermines the haunted, light-filled scene reminds us not only that ours is a world pegged at the quilting point where digital and natural worlds meet, but that it is through the affirmation of an ambiguous presence–absence entwining material, image and digital milieus that we partake most deeply in the reciprocal reaching that connects within to without. As the light of the outside reaches through the glass and bursts its frame, colouring outside of the lines, we are once again there and here, then and now, present and absent.

The photographs of oil on water and moiré patterns which were refrains of Harris' art in previous years – in works like *Shift_Vista* and *Dissolve View* (both 2016) – played with quotidian found instances of surfaces on surfaces: the underneath disturbing what lies above as the background pushes forward to mark the subject; or a floating layer of oil casting a spectrum of colour and virtual depth across murky canal water. These procedures of investigating the intensive difference within surfaces – what Harris has called, following Duchamp, the *inframince* – persists in more tangible ways throughout the *Monolith* triptych (2017–18). Here, Harris uses embossing to add depth to the surface (*Monolith I*), pencil rubbings pull the pattern of a paper-cut stencil up and through to the surface of the paper (*Monolith II*), and in the technique of chine collé (*Monolith III*), a thin paper-cut layer is passed through a printing press along with a digital print behind it, compounding the two layers of translucent Kozo paper into a single sheet. As, through this triptych of techniques, the surfaces of the paper are shown to have depth, we see a meshing of the

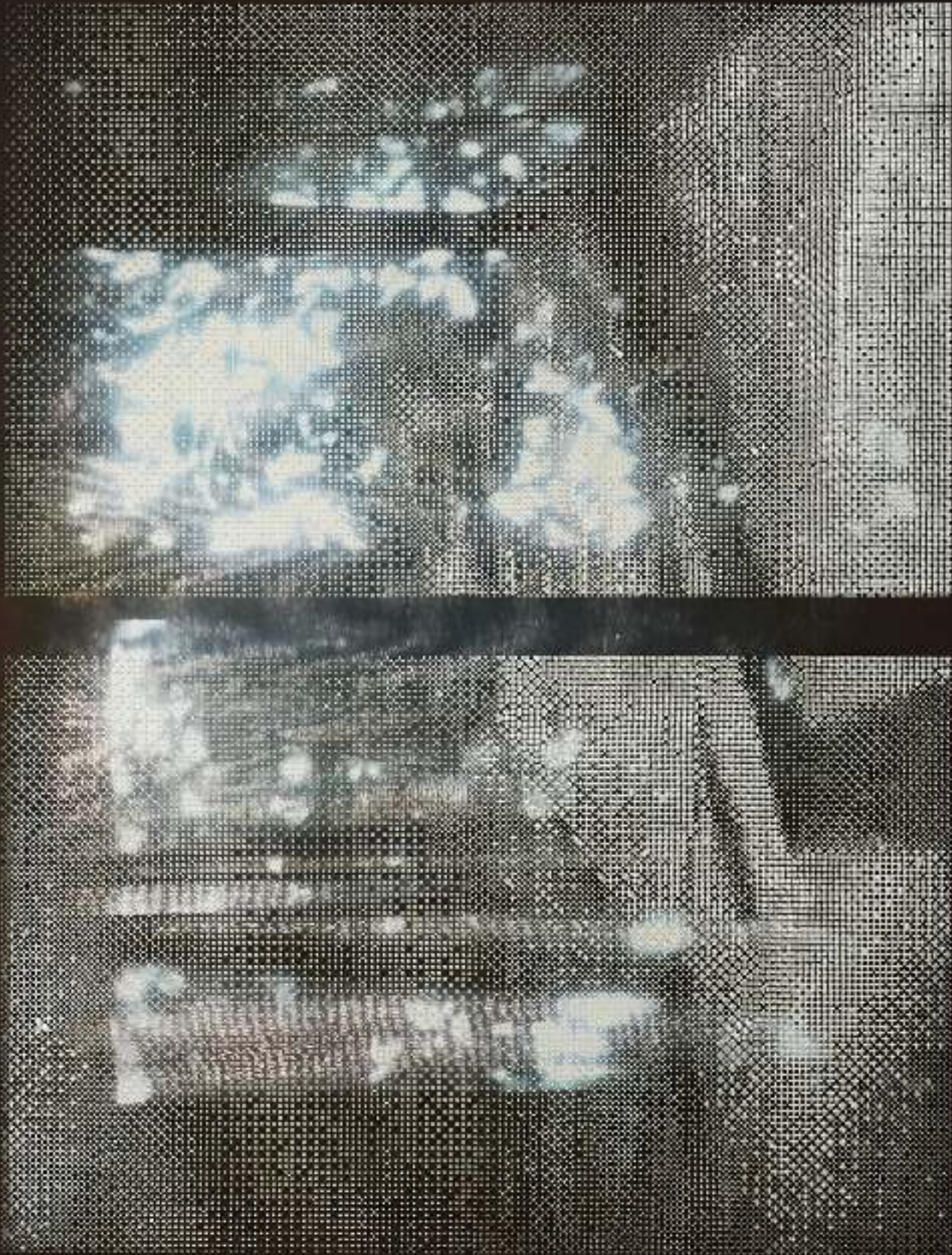
materiality of the substrate with the (often multiple) virtual-spatial dimensions of the images.

The stencil used for the embossing, rubbing and printing of the *Monolith* triptych is cut from a digital print of a bitmapped “poor” image, grabbed from a mobile-phone video clip, such that this resurfacing and assertion of materiality is intimately tied to the virtual-digital manipulation of the image. The compound pictorial image, the digital history of the image and the tangibility of the substrate are brought together in this resurfacing, as a dynamic mesh co-constituting the work of art.

The paper-cut stencils – themselves constituted as a presence/absence of the pixelated prints which determined the patterning of their holes – appear as ghosts within other pieces, cut into other images or pulled through to the paper's surface as rubbings, all the more ghostly for Harris' use of white pencil (as in *Thresholds* (2018)). But the process of rubbing also pits and dimples the paper, a process which, like the cut, allows the image – the negative, cutaway patterning of the undersheet – to take on a material depth and presence, ontologically refolded from material absence to ghostly presence. These images, of course, are simultaneously pictorial and digital artefacts impoverished into visibility, such that the materialised ghosts which the rubbings bring to the surface are indigenous to the digital-virtual. At the same time, Harris' laborious cutting process is deferred to a further remove, her hand haunting the paper-cut which haunts the rubbing.

If these hauntings press forward into the surfaces, giving them material depth, there is also virtual depths which Harris' work places us, the viewer, in. The copper pieces in the current exhibition, such as *Hard Copy (Shroud)* (2017) and *Hard Copy (Monolith)* (2018), are scanned from cut-out stencils and inverted (so that the pattern of the cuts becomes the pattern bitten into the copper). A play of depth and flatness is at work, here, both intensively and extensively. Within the pieces, we perceive the smooth copper and the etched depressions, the image produced by the selective destruction and preservation of surface. But those unbitten sections are reflective, not only producing a virtual depth, but one in which we catch glimpses of the gallery we are stood in and, indeed, of ourselves, over there. Correlating to the pixelated patterning of the copper, then, is a patterning of our bodies and this quotidian world, split between here and there, half reflected, half not, looping between image and matter through patterned digital artefacts; here and there, before and beyond a threshold; opened to an abstract beyond which we are, somehow, also materially occupying. As Michel Foucault has observed, there is a

Seeing the Light, 2018
Hand-cut archival pigment print, 97.5 x 126.5cm



utopian and an active, actual recombinant (or “heterotopian”) function enacted by seeing oneself “there where I am absent”, namely “in an unreal, virtual space that opens up behind the [reflective] surface”.⁸ But if there is this social and subjectifying radicality to seeing oneself otherwise and otherwheres, there is in reflections – and particularly in Harris’ patterned reflections, with their material and virtual depths – the kind of dysphoria which opens one up to that vibrating abstract space which characters as diverse as Michael Kubovy and Austin Osman Spare have called “spiritual”.⁹

—A Bright Haunting

If for Steyerl, the “poor image tends towards abstraction [and] is a visual idea in its very becoming”, it is clear that, in Harris’ work, the abstraction vectored toward is not the twentieth century universalist dream of a non-representational, hermetically flat art. Rather, she finds another – I would say deeper – abstraction within the figurative; an abstraction on which the digital depths and the noumenal beyond of the image converge, revealing a thickened surface which is, beguilingly, fundamentally material.

Thus, it is important to insist that Harris’ impoverishment of images is by no means to do with disenchantment – whether it be the critical and aestheticizing postproduction distress, the material degradation of reflection-warping etched and verdigrised copper, or the scraps and tails that fall toward us from the exquisitely cut paper surfaces. On the contrary, there is in these present and disturbed surfaces both an affirmation of the visual mysteries of the everyday – of the nests and folds of unknown dimensions which light plies and burrows as it plays on surfaces and darts through holes (both cut-out and tenebrous with ink) – and simultaneously, without contradiction, a yet more enchanted gesture towards an abstract-outside of unknown light and lightness. It is a noumenal yet immanent materiality that the physical substrate, the image and the virtual-digital artefacts each point toward, in themselves and in their looping entwinements. We are offered, here, an apprehension of a haunting that is not different in kind from the world – a parabolic journey out through the window, through the copper looking glass; a winding and unwinding of the shroud without laying definitive claim to its mysteries. There is love, here, of the infinite variety of the here and now, and it does not stand in contradiction with a rapture to the deep, light expanses of the transcendental.

- 1 The term is attributed to science fiction author William Gibson, tweeted (@GreatDismal) at 22.03 EST, 27th September 2011.
- 2 Hito Steyerl “In Defense of the Poor Image”, *e-flux Journal* #10 (November, 2009) <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/10/61362/in-defense-of-the-poor-image/> <Last accessed 19.04.18>
- 3 *ibid.*
- 4 See especially pp16–20 Evan Calder Williams *Shard Cinema* (London: Repeater, 2017)
- 5 pp44–7 Michel Foucault *Manet and the Object of Painting* trans. Mathew Barr (London: Tate Publishing, 2011)
- 6 See, for example, p292 Justin Barton and Mark Fisher “Outsights (Interview)” in Robin Mackay (ed.) *When Site Lost the Plot* (Falmouth: Urbanomic, 2015)
- 7 pp14–15 Michael Kubovy *The Psychology of Perspective and Renaissance Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988)
- 8 p24 Michel Foucault “Of Other Spaces”, trans. Jay Miskowiec, in *Diacritics* Vol. 16, No. 1 (Spring, 1986)
- 9 See, for example, p40 Austin Osman Spare *The Book of Pleasure: The Psychology of Ecstasy* [1913] (n.l.: One-Eye Publishing, 2018)

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Seeing the Light - Detail, 2018
Hand-cut archival pigment print, 97.5 x 126.5cm

Jon K Shaw is a writer, editor and educator based in southeast London. He teaches in the Department of Visual Cultures at Goldsmiths and at City & Guilds of London Art School, and has previously taught at West Dean College and Birmingham School of Art. With Tom Robinson he founded and edited *Rattle: A Journal at the Convergence of Art and Writing*, and with Theo Reeves-Evison edited and introduced the book *Fiction as Method* (Sternberg, 2017). His ongoing research concerns immanence, substrate and the philosophies, cultures, biologies and geontologies of movement. He is currently working on two books, one on the lucid materialism of Antonin Artaud, and a second on poetry, dance and financial products that suspend oppositions between life and death.

Caroline Jane Harris is an artist based in London whose practice encompasses photography, printmaking and drawing. Harris completed a BA in Fine Art Printmaking at University of Brighton (2009) and an MA in Fine Art at City & Guilds of London Art School (2015), where Shaw was her dissertation tutor. Harris was Research Printmaking Fellow for 2016-18 at City & Guilds of London Art School, where she developed her own experimental processes with JPEG images and intaglio etching, whilst engaging with the students. She was selected for the ASC Exhibition Award (2017-18), the Florence Trust Residency (2016-17) and Photofusion Select Bursary and Exhibition Award (2015-16). Harris has exhibited her work in the UK and internationally, is held in numerous private collections and has been featured in publications such as *Trebuchet Magazine*, *Art Maze Mag*, *Red* magazine and *Paper Play* (Sandu Cultural Media 2014).

