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URBIS OBSCURA

The city as negative space

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Dear Dieter Mersch,

I am sending you my greetings from a rainy Utrecht and wish my letter finds you well. Let me reintroduce myself: I was one of the Master Scenography students that participated in the seminar that took place earlier this year in HKU. At the last day we had the opportunity to hold a very brief discussion after the closing up of the seminar, regarding the vocabulary around research, how it is translated between English and Greek, and the equivalences and differences between them. This has been a turning point in the thread of my thought around the topic of artistic research, something that sparked a more clear view on what artistic research is and how it is being understood.

The idea of writing this letter came as I was cycling back home after that last day. This traveling time is when I usually process ideas, information, concepts I have gathered during the day, and this particular day has given me a lot to reflect on. Pedaling slowly but steadily next to the Oudegracht, in a quiet hour with sparse passers-by, our short discussion was circling in my mind. Let's strip research from the re-, and we are there. But how is this related to *zetesis*,¹ and how different is *zetesis* from *anazetesis*? Is it then a matter of different perceptions of the words in different languages?

¹ Dieter Mersch, *Art, knowledge, and reflexivity*. 2017

In order to begin untangling this thread, it would be good to refer to all these words more specifically. Firstly, I would like to stress that I own the advantage of receiving the use of Greek terms as a layer of familiarity, and which would probably be the totally opposite if I wasn't a native Greek speaker. My mother tongue is where I also refer when discussing or reflecting on terms that might be ambiguous to me, trying to find a solution or a counterproposal. This is where I turn to whenever I am bothered by an English term, being aware of the variation of meanings and definitions between different languages, but also how words are subject to transformation within the same language as time goes by. This was also my approach with the term *research* (in art and as art). Having a fixed idea of what scientific research means but also considering lived experience as a means of practicing research through observation, I have to a certain point determined that research is not confined to one method for all fields. However, when faced with the question of artistic research, these ideas started to become more unstable. And this was caused by the immediate assumption that research is a result oriented practice. And if I use my inherent tendency to translate back to Greek, I would call research *ereuna*, which resembles more an act of dissecting your subject, analyzing, evaluating and coming up with conclusions. I found it impossible to liken this process with the way art creates knowledge (or as you have proposed, *wisdom*),² which I would rather describe as a zetetic endeavour instead of a path that leads to a goal. Is then artistic research different from ana-zetesis? In the sense it is used in Greek, not that much. But isn't anazetesis the exact equivalent of the word research?

2 Dieter Mersch, *Art, knowledge, and reflexivity*. 2017

Anazetesis implies a more personal, 'subjective' quest for something to be revealed. We could say that *ereuna* is result oriented and anazetesis not exclusively goal oriented, but driven by an initial *zetoumenon*; it doesn't need to follow a specific method but it is motivated by something that needs to be discovered. It can be applied for investigations of the soul, looking inwards, but also as a venture 'out there'. If we eliminate the ana- from anazetesis, thus take the steps between research, *ereuna*, anazetesis, and end up to zetesis, which I have to agree with you is more suitable to describe artistic research, then (re)search becomes an open ended exploration, where the findings have no yes/no value.

Exploration is another word that I would compare to the way an artist does research or a researcher does art. It resembles a quest undertaken that can be driven by a trigger but not have an end goal. It depends on gathering data but focused more on the peculiar, the unfamiliar, the exotic. The researcher-explorer hunts into unknown territories, collects, observes, documents, disassembles, composes, translates, reflects, makes, thinks, and exposes the findings in various media. In Greek what he does is called *exereunesis*, which again brings the term *ereuna* on the table. The ex- used in that case could mean either an outward movement or a profound, exhaustive process followed - I am not the right person to give a good etymological interpretation, I can only say that both seem to be relevant in the way I perceive it. *Ereunesis* stems from *ereuna* and I would describe it as the act of researching. Are we then trapped in a never ending circle between research and

search? I would say that maybe in the case of artistic research, we can talk about following such trajectories but being always susceptible to derailments. This might be a cause for misunderstandings that do no justice either to artistic or scientific research. I have at certain cases seen artistic research being considered as a method that seeks justification and validity that only science deserves. And then again, this kind of parallelism to scientific methods reduces artistic research and impoverishes it.

One thing is for sure; the ambiguity remains. Not only in terms of perceiving it, but rather in the vocabulary used about artistic research. According to me this happens because artistic research can be as ungraspable as it is diverse, it isn't easily bounded to specific frames. And thinking about the (open) end result, it is value and essence that matters instead of validity.

I wouldn't expect myself to arrive yet to concrete ideas, and I might here be ruminating the same over and over again. However there is one thing I strongly believe and have become more convinced about while reading your ideas and participating in our discussion : the vocabulary utilized when talking about artistic research is underdeveloped or will constantly resist definition.

I hope I did not bother you for too long with my thoughts. It would be a great pleasure to receive your response if you feel there is anything you would like to suggest, add or debate on.

Best regards,

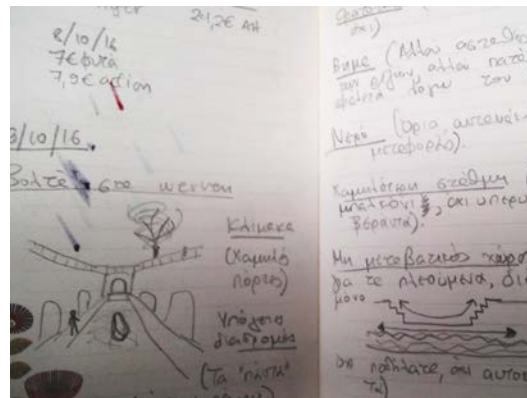
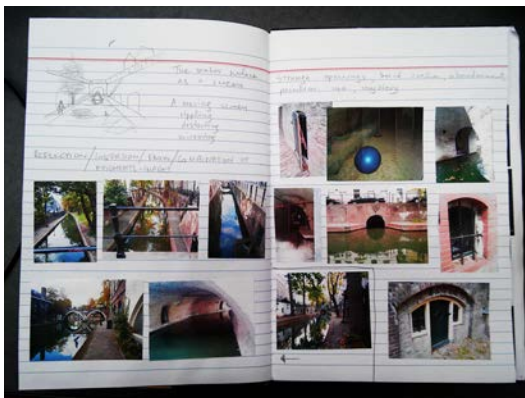
Persi Ioannidou

URBAN EXPLORATION

Doing research springs from the need to investigate a specific topic and it is consistently linked to this certain subject. Its initial point is mostly easily defined; the researcher starts collecting data, reading articles and books, follows the steps that will lead to the conclusion, the result of the research. In artistic 'research',³ the kick-off is not always easily determined and the line by which research is separated from daily life is not so clear. Artistic 'research' has its defining landmarks but can be very much associated with habits, everyday practices, and many times with obsessions. In my very own case the starting point was made on a day almost two years ago when I stepped outside my front door, with my only intention to follow my gut and let my intuition take me anywhere. My first step into artistic 'research' was by starting an exploration in urban space. And this could be considered a usual day in my life, since I do this kind of explorations on a regular basis not always having a specific topic, destination or goal in my mind. The only difference this time was that I would do this more attentively and for that reason I was further equipped with my camera and notebook, on which I could document images and words that would spark something in my mind. So we are not talking about following a methodology here, but about employing a habit of mine in my new work and letting it transform into a topic, a body of work that would be my personal attempt into artistic 'research'.

³ From time to time I will be using the word research in quotation marks. As has been made explicit already I am many times uncomfortable with the use of the word research for, well, artistic 'research'. This is a result of my failure to come up with the right alternative to express this already vague for me concept.

Walking in the city can take the form of an explorative undertaking. As an explorer observes the oddities of an unknown territory, the urban ‘researcher’ inspects the surroundings where he coexists with other dwellers of the city, looking for the unfamiliar and extraordinary aspects of their common-place environment. Observing is the combination of moving through space and seeing/hearing. While exploring and wandering in urban space, the ‘researcher’ finds triggers for thought, detects connections and associations, but also anomalies and breaches. Walking is a process that doesn’t only carry your physical presence further, but motivates a certain kind of movement of the mind; ideas emerge as images and sounds shuffle and change around you, enriched by the sensations and impressions gathered. Thinking becomes a bodily activity, or an extension of the bodily activity of moving⁴. And the associations made don’t need to be related to the now and here, but can be carried in as fragments of the past, intertwining memories and prior experiences with the artistic ‘research’ undertaken. Research loses its linearity, it resembles a mesh woven out of threads of irregular length, some parts creating a clear and consistent fabric and others being loose, snarled, difficult to define.



⁴ In *Ecce homo : how one becomes what one is*, Friederich Nietzsche mentions the influence of the bodily movement on thinking : “Sit as little as possible; give credence to no thought that is not born in the open air and accompanied by free movement — in which the muscles do not also celebrate a feast. [...] — Sitting still — I have said it once already — the real sin against the holy spirit.”

Exploration starts by following a certain path that was created for access from one place to the other. However, while observing you sometimes find yourself being attracted by spots that can't be physically reached or are only accessible through an alternative route. You might feel the urge to reach the top of a high building in order to have a bird's eye view, "lifted out of the city's grasp" in an investigative movement that transfigures you into *a voyeur*⁵ or step down to underground places to intrude inside the sunken parts of the city. As Michel de Certeau writes in "Walking in the city",

*"The ordinary practitioners of the city live 'down below', below the thresholds at which visibility begins. They walk -an elementary form of this experience of the city; they are walkers, Wandersmaenner, whose bodies follow the thicks and thins of an urban 'text' they write without being able to read it. These practitioners make use of spaces that cannot be seen; their knowledge of them is as blind as that of lovers in each other's arms. [...] The networks of these moving, intersecting writings compose a manifold story that has neither author nor spectator, shaped out of fragments of trajectories and alterations of spaces [...]"*⁶

In the same book, de Certeau introduces a parallelism of the act of walking with the act of speaking. As he explains:

*"The act of walking is to the urban system what the speech act is to language or to the statements uttered."*⁷



⁵ Michel de Certeau, *The practice of everyday life*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988, p.92

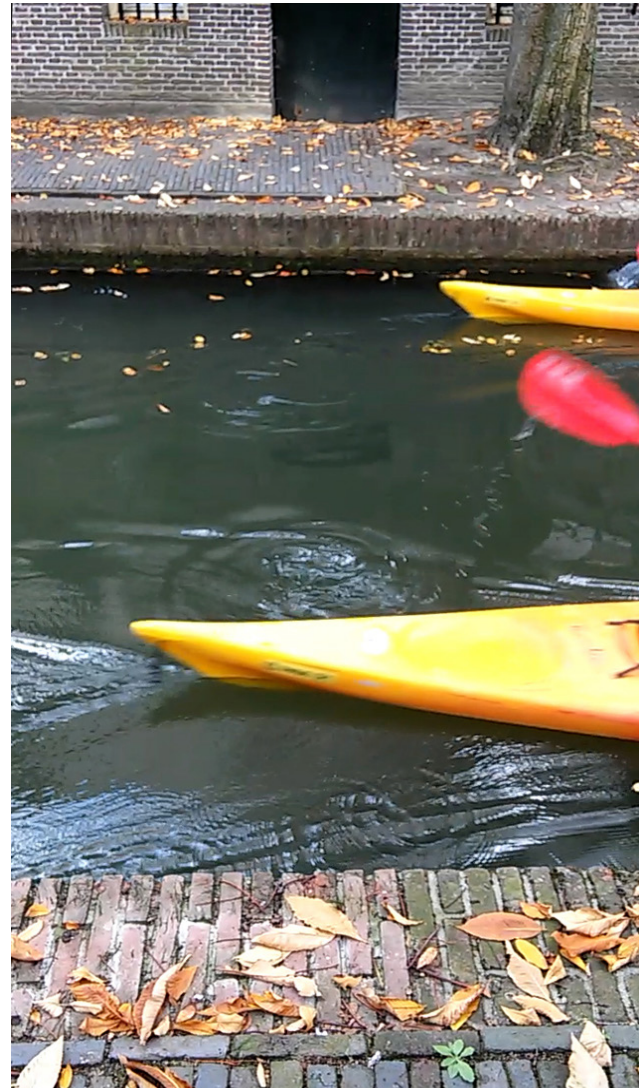
⁶ Ibid. p.93

⁷ Ibid. p.97



“The walking of passers-by offers a series of turns (tours) and detours that can be compared to ‘turns of phrase’ or ‘stylistic figures’. There is a rhetoric of walking. The art of “turning” phrases finds an equivalent in an art of composing a path (tourner un parcours).”

(M. de Certeau, 1998 : 100)

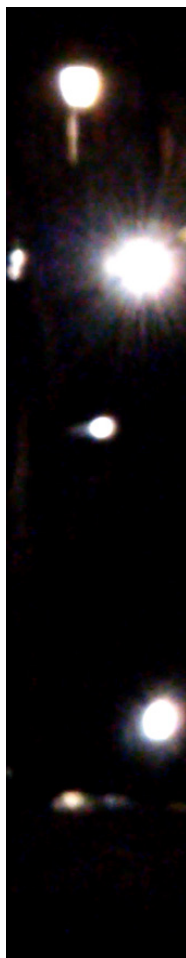
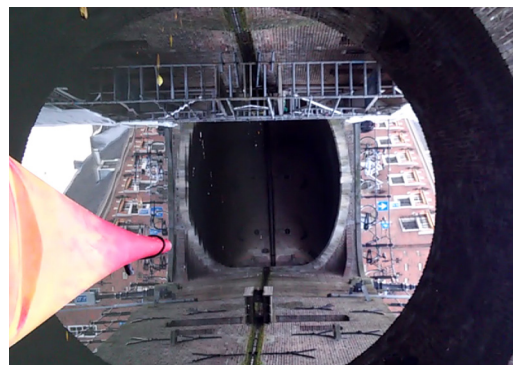


Utrecht is a city permeated by water.

While wandering through the city center, I was immediately drawn by the water's effects and plays with light and time. I would gaze at the canal surfaces as a screen that projects a distorted reflection of its surroundings. This surface also is a layer where these mirages coexist with floating objects in a fascinating merging of virtual and physical. Captivated, I was brought at the edge of the water, walking and exploring the characteristic wharfs of Utrecht, looking how this very distinct separation implies and strengthens an interaction between the two sides of the canal, how someone's presence on the opposite bank acquires a new meaning, how this visual shortcut contradicts the detour one has to take in order to obtain the opposite spot, and also the curiosity it triggers for someone to look from the other side.



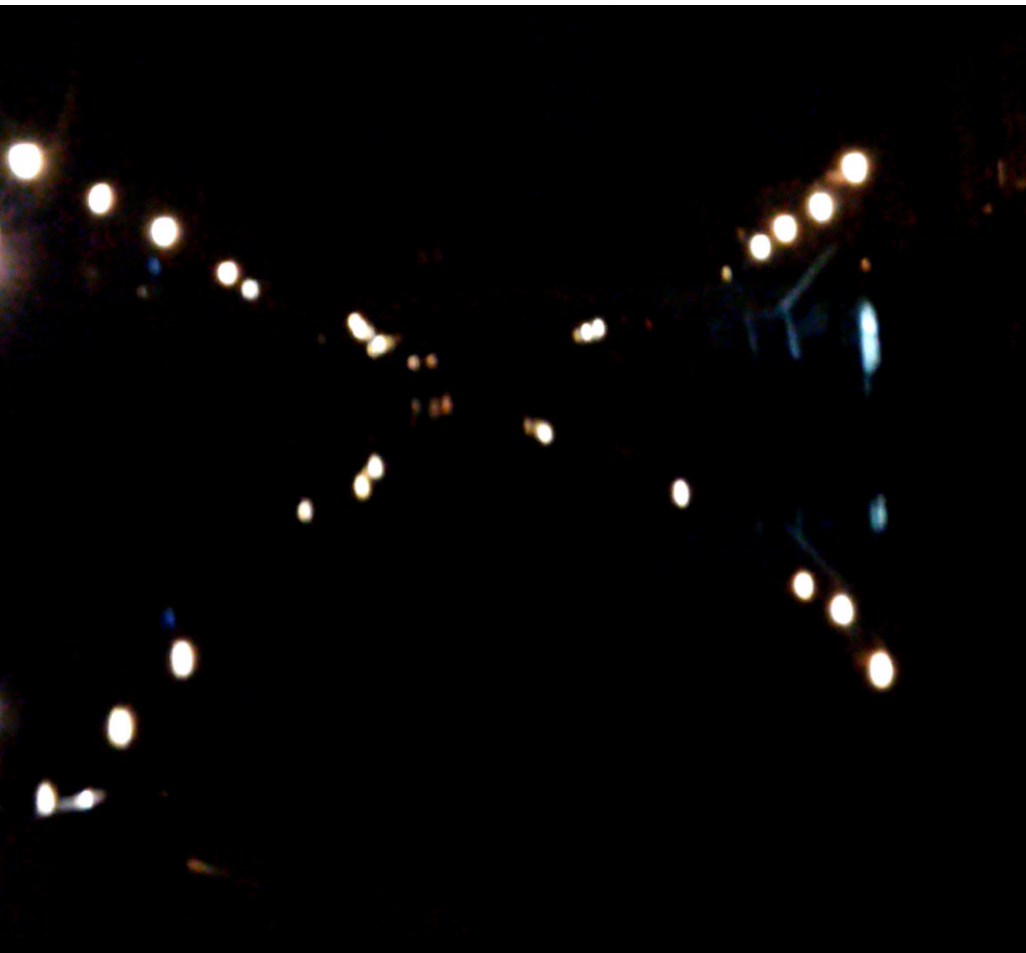
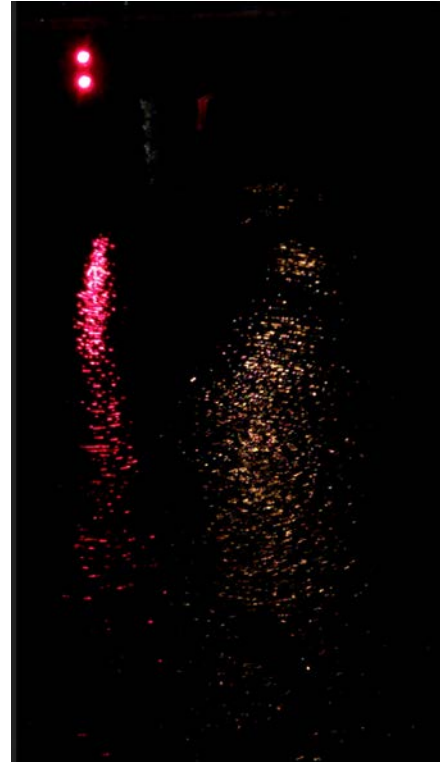
My impulse to explore those somewhat hidden parts of the city brought me on a canoe, navigating through the waterways. Floating on the canal forced my body to an unfamiliar way of movement. Walking gives you the opportunity to stop or change your direction without much effort; on the contrary, this spontaneity is severely limited for the inexperienced paddler. Most of the times I just had to go with the flow, surrendering adrift an insecure and unstable one-way path. What I gained in exchange was a different point of view, close to the water surface which implies different findings and observations. Now I was immersed inside the illusive world of reflections, myself being one of the objects floating on the water surface, inside a strange wonderland shaped by bright daytime colours. inversion and mirrorings. The journey on the canoe sparked my curiosity about what I would find out going on a similar trip by night. This time I went for the safety of a boat round trip, which started as dusk was falling.



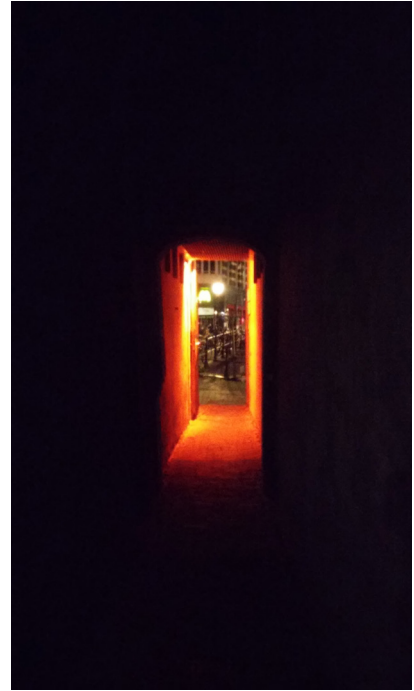
By night the contours of buildings vanish, and so do the reflected images on the water surface. What remains is the street lights, the lit up windows, flashes from bikes, cars, shadows and figures of passers-by. The turbulent serenity of the canoe journey is replaced by the engine's noise and the shadiness that encloses us. As we approach the outskirts of the city center and darkness prevails, the water mirroring brings forth a different impression, a sensation of being surrounded by constellations and floating through a universe of artificial lights.

The night is a filter.

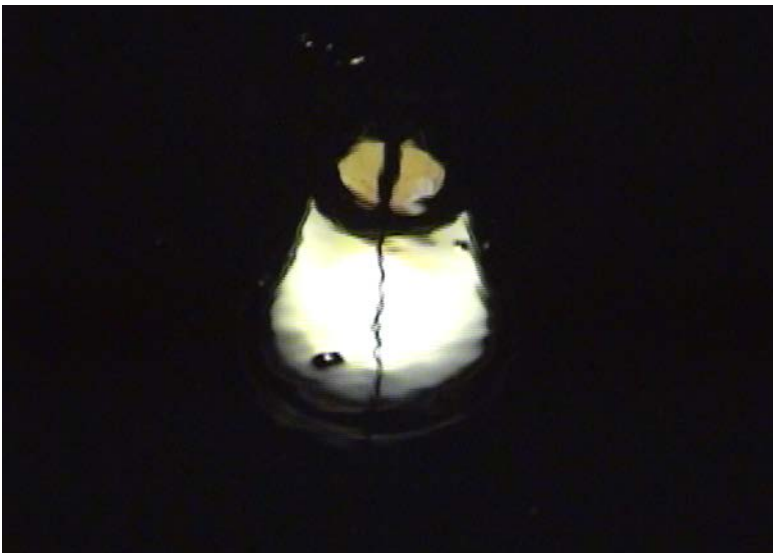
In the day, public space is full of sensory stimuli, colours and shapes are mixed in a continuously shifting environment. As darkness falls the city gradually switches to another mode; what we see becomes much more still, sensory overload fades away and artificial lighting gives away locations where activity is taking place. This muting filter that night throws upon the urban space lets us witness distant events and occurrences. The outskirts of the city come closer, one loses the contours of the buildings in favor of a sensation of floating inside a space of sporadic shimmers of activity, or implications of it. This



broadening of attentiveness reminds of what Tim Ingold refers to as a stretch of attention that is reaching out.⁸ It is interesting how these sparse distant acts and movements are perceived by means of light and sound; the flashing light of a bicycle approaches you, car headlights shine far at the end of a road, the passing trains are heard from far away, happenings going on behind closed doors become visible through lit window frames. The space where life takes place is mostly in the house interiors. We become aware of this transition through the lit windows, what they reveal, what they let us see. Staying at the shade and looking through the windows is equivalent to looking outside of the darkness, into fragments of everyday life and how they intend to become presented and exhibited to the dark unknown. The city at night becomes a camera obscura; not a black box inside which an image turns upside down, but where another kind of inversion takes place. Urban space metamorphoses to a dark universe where inside is inverted to outside.



URBAN EXPLORATION

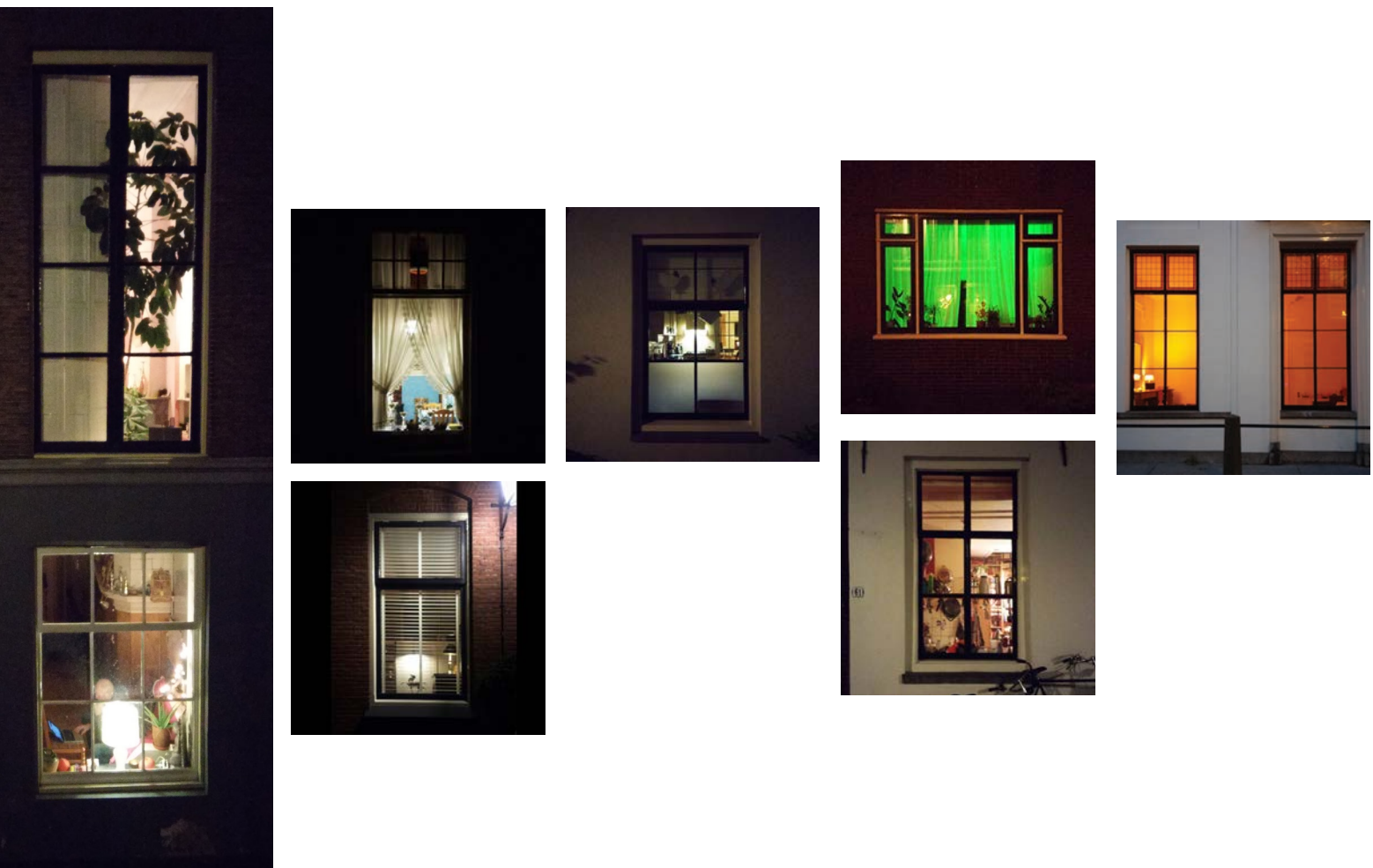


⁸ As phrased by Tim Ingold in his lecture “On not knowing and paying attention: how to live in a world of uncertainty”.

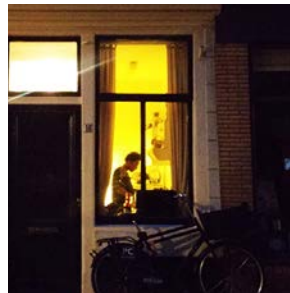
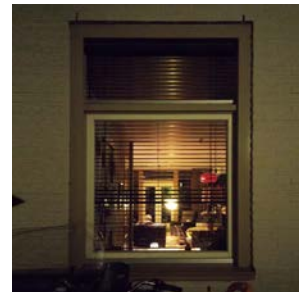
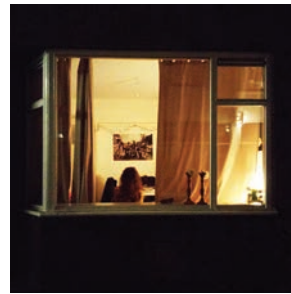


The window is a two-way visual frame.

Usually it is an opening to the outside world, especially in heavily populated urban areas where privacy is being more praised but also more susceptible to violation. With that in mind, someone would expect the dense Dutch urban space to accordingly protect private life from visual intrusion. Surprisingly, what one finds out instead is an extrovert attitude towards the gaze entering from outside. In the Dutch housing space people have a very special way of displaying their private view through their windows. You can't avoid noticing how meticulously those frames of everyday life are decorated, when you come across them you can see what people in there are busy with, very often you meet a lazy cat staring at you through the glass. Due to this visual attraction, the gaze while walking or cycling past a housing area is directed more towards the house facades instead of straight ahead. But still, what is revealed is not a complete image, and the quickness with which someone passes by gives a fleeting glimpse, an impression, a frame open to free interpretation.



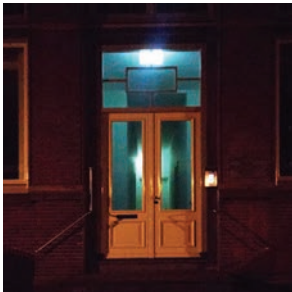
Being a watcher by nature, I always found very intriguing looking inside houses through open windows. Late one day, close to midnight, I came across a fully lit window, offering me total viewing access inside a kitchen -I could see the table with the chairs, photo frames hanging from the wall, the texture of blue tiles in contrast to brown wooden ribbing, but no one in there. What a strange feeling that was, to stand there examining a private space but which was made available to me without any obvious hesitation, and making me wonder who has been there a few minutes ago, why was the light on, should I expect someone? I felt like a trespasser when I made that photo, and if they saw me, I know I would feel bad but would also justify myself since nothing was prohibiting me from intruding, on the contrary it was almost inviting me to do so.



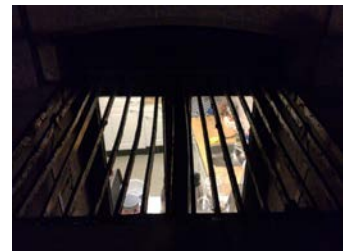
And then I discovered that although by night the city mostly goes to sleep, with a few gleams of activity which are normally expected during that time of the day, the display of indoor life is what sparks inside the darkness. The 'inside' turns to 'outside', and the activity -or non activity- that goes on in the houses is showcased for the passer-by. Life goes on indoors, but doesn't do it by hiding or finding shelter in a retreat, it is there for you to see.

Going underground

Most urban settlements have an underground level which is mostly hidden to the passer-by. Likewise, Utrecht has her own subterranean part; however, there are spots from where it becomes visually and physically accessible. By going down to the wharfs you already start discovering an area ruled by different qualities, somewhat shadier, somewhat neglected. This level is reached by dedicated pathways which don't belong to the main pedestrian and vehicle circulation. Consequently, the sensory experience is much influenced by these qualities : vivid urban life is taking place on the level above, which is reflected below mostly in terms of sound. What reaches down from the urban soundscape is blended with dripping sounds echoing from inside the murky tunnels.



While watching through the night windows, I discovered openings at the ground level that revealed a level I haven't yet noticed, consisting of inhabited basements. Sometimes I only heard sounds coming from them; gusts of gas pipes and air exhausts, muffled voices and music. Other times, unable to resist my voyeuristic tendency, I peek through those oddly placed windows when they are illuminated. This time I have to shift my gaze downwards, and also focus my ear to the level of my walk.

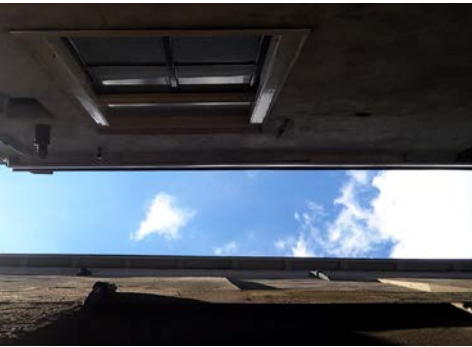


An attentive urban walk is usually full of surprises.

That happens when I take a turn into one of the numerous narrow passageways that meet the Oudegracht vertically. Walking into one of them, I find myself absorbed inside the city's body, like hiding in a crevice. Places like that resist the establishment of many aspects of the modern commercial city center; they constitute a damper of activity and noise. The internal micro-soundscapes are dominant here; water pipes dripping, grids letting out sounds of air streams, some voices behind walls and closed windows. I press my ear against a gutter tube and enjoy the reverberating sound of water drops.

The spatial proportions here are rather uncommon and force my body to react differently. I turn my head up, a 'slice' of sky stands out from the rigid walls as clouds drift across the deep blue stripe, a bird flying through this elongated frame emphasizes more the stillness of the built volumes.





“...negativity doesn’t necessarily mean negation or rejection but rather to look at things from their dark or back side. [...] we learn at most about our topic by addressing these dark sides, their ruptures, fissures and breakdowns or dead-ends.”

(Dieter Mersch, 2016)

Inside this phrase I find the essence of what I was after while exploring the urban settings of Utrecht. It is an old, picturesque city that amazes you with its beauty and charm, but due to its antiquity and complexity it also demonstrates the kind of obscurity I was after.

Being raised in a place with a more chaotic and unstructured character, I have already become skilled in exploring surroundings that were abounding in these kind of anomalies. The Dutch landscape, whether urban or rural, to me appears as a tamed space, organized in all its details. I wanted to find a negative of the Dutch city, and in its darkest version.

The decision was made and I booked a ride to Charleroi, a city in the Belgian province of Wallonie that has for decades been dependent on coal mining and steel industry, and which has already enticed me by its awe inspiring industrial landscape. Most of the factories are shut down but they stand there, derelict phantoms of a bygone booming industry inside a land of cables, wires, broken glasses, dusty brown structures and friendly people. Upon arriving, you are confronted with the overwhelming sight of such relics and you navigate through them while entering the city via the highway, disoriented by its confusing exits and turns, following barely visible road signs. However, I manage to arrive at the central station in perfect timing for my meeting with Nicolas, who is giving a guided tour through the ruins and some of the most interesting locations of the city. Being in a small group of people who share the same curiosity, we head out for the adventure in the heart of a city full of vacant shops, houses with narrow doors, closed curtains, neighbourhoods with deserted streets. He takes us through secret passages, into abandoned warehouses that will soon be demolished, on the top of a waste coal pile, along the river where trade and processing of metal scrap is taking place. This directed walk gave me a necessary bit of confidence to dare to venture alone and instinctively explore further.

The next morning is cold but sunny, a weather I enjoy while walking so I head to the river in order to explore its other bank. From the moment you step down to the riverside walkway, you get an inescapable sense of insecurity. It is a long linear paved path with no visible way out to the street level and although there is no one to be seen there are human traces scattered around. I dare to follow the path and soon get absorbed by images and impressions: the implication of human presence, the water reflection, the iridescent oil pollution spots in the river. Soon I find myself close to an industrial site which we saw the other day from the opposite side, one of the few openings where the path meets the road and some people are also taking a walk. Their sight makes me less reluctant to continue my riverside walk and advance along the immense metal warehouses.



The water reflection effects combined with their surroundings are something totally different from what I have seen in Utrecht. The linear structures and textures that are found here are distorted while projected on the water, leading to an absolutely mesmerizing experience. Now I am standing all alone inside the depths of the industrial landscape, again surrounded by the sound and smell of metal. The viewpoint allows me to gain visual access on things that were implied but not seen while walking yesterday. We then came close to enormous calipers, transferring portions of scrap metal from boats to an invisible location of which only the overwhelming sound of crumbling parts and bits could be heard; now the huge rusty pile was building up in front of me at the other side of the river.



After an hour of walking along these astounding settings, I find myself in an area at the outskirts of the city. I head back to the center where large groups of children with their parents are looking for their Saturday night entertainment, the cafes are open and people are having food and drinks. The night is obscure but neon lights shimmer all around.

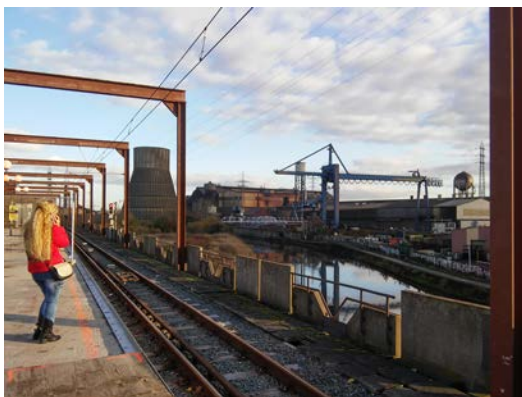


My next day was dedicated to navigating through the whole metro system : a hybrid of metro and tram that takes circular routes around the center and branches off towards the suburbs, including a ghost metro line that was finished but never used. The words of de Certeau once again come to mind : “There is something at once incarceration and navigational about railroad travel”.⁹ In his writings about railroad traveling he focuses on the experience as shaped by the distinction between inside and outside.

“A traveling incarceration. Immobile inside the train, seeing immobile things slip by. What is happening? Nothing is moving inside or outside the train.”¹⁰

“Between the immobility of the inside and that of the outside a certain quid pro quo is introduced, a slender blade that inverts their stability. The chiasm is produced by the windowpane and the rail.”¹¹

This kind of suppressive immobility crumbles inside the specific route. The small train rattles and quakes as it moves on the curvy tracks, moving up and down through tunnels, passes through stations under construction, stumbling passengers hold on the grips. The driver’s cabin is mostly made of transparent plastic which opens up the view to the rails in front of us, but also partially reflects the interior of the wagon and the exterior lights of the tunnels and the platforms; no doubt this is a unique transportation experience which resembles an urban rollercoaster. The incarceration sensation is there but what is more prominent is



⁹ Michel de Certeau, *The practice of everyday life*, p. 113

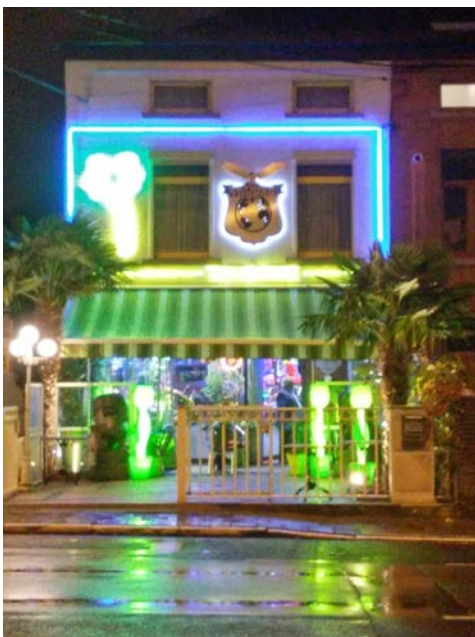
¹⁰ *Ibid*, p. 111

¹¹ *Ibid*, p. 112



“an accidental element in it. Jolts, brakings, surprises arise from this motor of the system. This residue of events depend on an invisible and single actor, [...] the machine”¹².

I would say, the machine is just an actor of a steel movement written by the environment itself.



The night is wild in Charleroi, and I decide to spend it in the warmth of a restaurant furnished in wood and burgundy tones. This combination of velvet textures with the bleak yellowish road lights gives me an eery sensation of stepping inside a David Lynch film. One bottle of belgian beer later, I walk back to my room, confronted by figures of men standing at corners, witnessing an almost crash of a car with the tram, seeking refuge from the light rain and the piercing cold. Next day I will be gone, left with my dreamy impressions and a promise to return soon to this dystopic playground.

¹² Ibid, p. 111

RE-WRITING SPACE

Walking resembles writing.

As was previously mentioned, Michel de Certeau has compared the act of walking with the speech act. As an investigator of urban space through different ways of movement, I have many times felt that I took the role of the writer, but also that of a reader; 'research' becomes a manifold process of writing a spatial text but also reading my surroundings and underlining conjunctions or paradoxes.

Being an explorer is equivalent to being a collector.

Like a reader is underlining passages and keeping notes, as an explorer I have been accumulating material during my journeys in various forms, deliberately collected through my camera and sound recorder, written on my notebook as sketches and ideas, or subconsciously inscribed on an unknown part of myself as sensations and impressions, waiting for the right moment to emerge.

What has caught my attention most during my walks belongs to a realm outside the ordinary, or the common-place interpretation of it. My journeys constitute a venture for the different, "an exploration of the deserted places of my memory" while moving into *other landscapes*¹³. Stepping outside your front door becomes a *walking exile*, producing the "body of legends that is currently lacking in one's own vicinity"¹⁴, a fiction.

Michel de Certeau describes walking as a *long poem*¹⁵. My intention was to share my solitary poems in a readable rendition; since I am not a poet of words, I would attempt the transcription in spatial terms.

13 Ibid p. 106-107

14 Ibid p. 106-107

15 Ibid p. 101

"...learning to see is 'training careful blindness'. We always see less than is there."

(Peggy Phelan, 1993:13 - cited by M. Bleeker, 2008: 23)

"We also always see more than is there. The term 'seer' [...] is also associated with insight, revelations, prophecy, second sight and magic. [...] future things, absent things. Seeing always involves projections, fantasies, desire and fears, and might be closer to hallucinating than we think."

(Maaïke Bleeker, 2008: 23)

"[W]ays of seeing are [...] rerouted through memory and fantasy, caught up in threads of the unconscious [...] seeing appears to later the thing seen and to transform the one seeing."

(Maaïke Bleeker, 2008: 15)

Dealing with the visual realm has in recent times become subject of criticism in philosophical circles, and me myself have been involved in reflecting around this topic. Many thinkers have expressed concerns about how the visual imposes itself on the more tactile, bodily aspect of spaces and events.¹⁶ However, although I could comprehend the core of this argument and have supported it to a certain degree, I always felt somehow distanced from this theoretical approach, as I have always been a visual creature, very much intrigued by thoughts around what I see and how I see it. I was also very curious about how other people see things, since I am a "sufferer" of amblyopia. This sight disorder never allowed me to truly be sure that I can experience vision as most people do, for example the three dimensional perception of space. It has also been a field of play during my early childhood, when I would close each eye and have a look at my surroundings, alternating between a clear and a blurred 'lens'. This has given me a strong but not yet defined sensation that the visual is rooted deep inside the body, and lets myriads of ideas and thoughts spring out of complex, unconscious processes. As James Elkins describes :

"[S]eeing is irrational, inconsistent, and undependable. It is immensely troubled, cousin to blindness and sexuality, and caught up in the threads of the unconscious. Our eyes are not ours to command; they roam where they will and then tell us they have only been where we have sent them. [...] seeing alters the thing that is seen and transforms the seer. Seeing is metamorphosis, not mechanism."¹⁷

¹⁶ Martin Jay's book *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* provides an extensive survey on this subject.

¹⁷ James Elkins, *The object stares back : on the nature of seeing*. San Diego ; London : Harcourt Brace , 1997, p.11

“[...] we get along in the world by pretending, or perhaps I should say deeply believing, that vision is passive”, Elkins says.¹⁸ And then, according to Maaïke Bleeker, “[t]he disadvantage of the word ‘spectator’ is that it has come to be associated with passivity”¹⁹. As a budding spectator, I didn’t feel disadvantaged at all; on the contrary, the act of looking for me was a field of active exploration.

“In a sense, perspective transforms psychophysiological space into mathematical space. It negates the differences between front and back, between right and left, between bodies and intervening space [...] It forgets that we see not with a single fixed eye but with two constantly moving eyes.”

(Erwin Panofsky, 1991: 31)



Having surrendered to my total grip on the visual, I implemented it extensively in my first scenographic attempts. Visual fragments as still and moving images made up the largest part of my collection and at times claiming exclusiveness in my collecting and making process. Moreover, the act of looking at was addressed with the use of different optical devices in my spatial compositions. In those mini theaters, dedicated for solitary experience, my collected fragments were mostly displayed in ways that emphasized the visual aspect : mirrors, binoculars, a view master, slide projectors and video beamers.

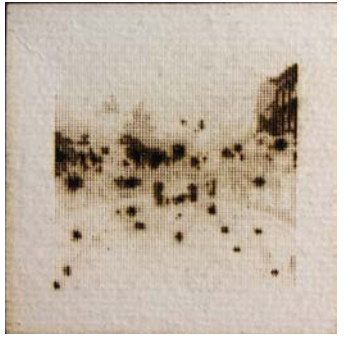
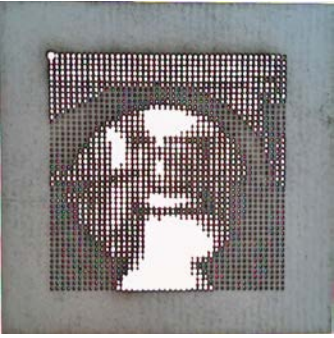
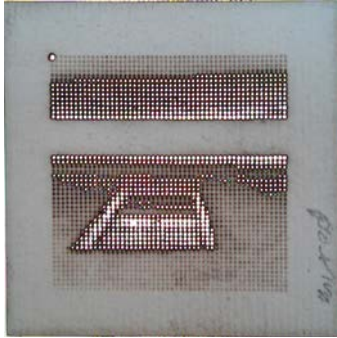
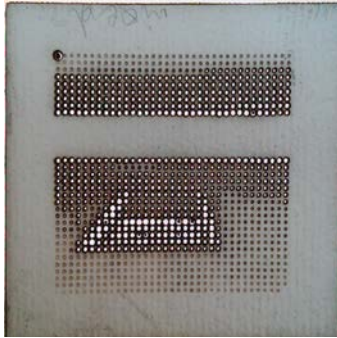
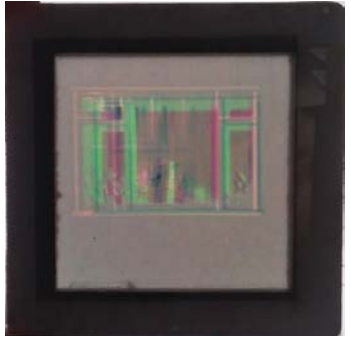
¹⁸ Ibid. p.24

¹⁹ Maaïke Bleeker, *Visuality in the theatre : the locus of looking*. Basingstoke [England] ; New York : Palgrave Macmillan, 2008, p. 23

The 35 mm photographic still escapes from the slide projector and becomes a tiny scenery. By multiplying and overlaying the image in its original and edited versions, combined with light thrown at its back, I convert the slides into miniature spaces which provoke a strong desire to be walked through. These spaces are small scaled but the moment you take a close look on them you are fully immersed inside this in-between space that invites you to traverse it. As soon as the different instances are superimposed in varying distances and combinations, they turn into vague ghosts or are thrown as shadows on each other. Is this a mini-maquette for a larger spatial setup? Or does keeping this diminished size, persuading you to look as if through a keyhole, augment the effect of immersion?

“[...] to scrutinize means to turn the photograph over, to enter into the paper’s depth, to reach its other side [...]”

(Roland Barthes, 1993: 100)





“Thinking does not take place in the head alone. [...] I am beginning to believe more and more that ‘thinking’ first and foremost takes place in the body.”

(Jan Ritsema 1998 : 345, as cited and translated by M. Bleeker in *Visuality in the theatre : the locus of looking*, 2008: p. 180)

There comes a moment when you stop moving
physically but the mind, driven by momentum,
keeps on traveling.

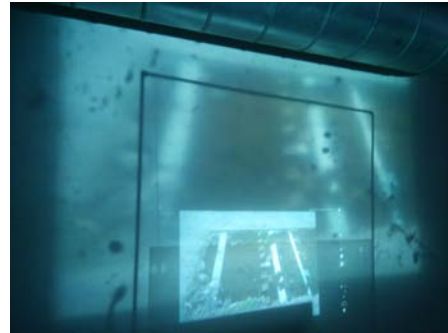


And then you end up inside a black, neutral space.

A black box inside which the collected images are processed and developed. I wanted to blow up my spatial micrographies, and for that I would need materials that share common properties with my miniature models : materials transparent, able to act as layers where images are shown and also overlapped.

THE DARK ROOM

Glass is unpredictable. It accommodates both immateriality and reflectivity; the moment you think it will reveal what's behind it, you are looking at your image staring back at you. Being an element commonly used in moving structural parts, it is often seen revolving, sliding, overlaying.



“[...] its elusive and modal qualities which go beyond its physical properties of hardness, transparency and reflectivity. Qualifiers such as ‘polymorphism’, ‘entropy’, ‘dematerialization’, ‘evaporative character’, and ‘mirages’ reveal the full spectrum of the symbolic resonances of glass.[...] through the multiple mediation of glass [...] the eerie feeling of sliding spaces [...]”
 (Elizabeth Sakellaridou, from the chapter Looking From Either Side of Glass, *Playing offstage : the theater as a presence or factor in the real world*. Lanham, Maryland :

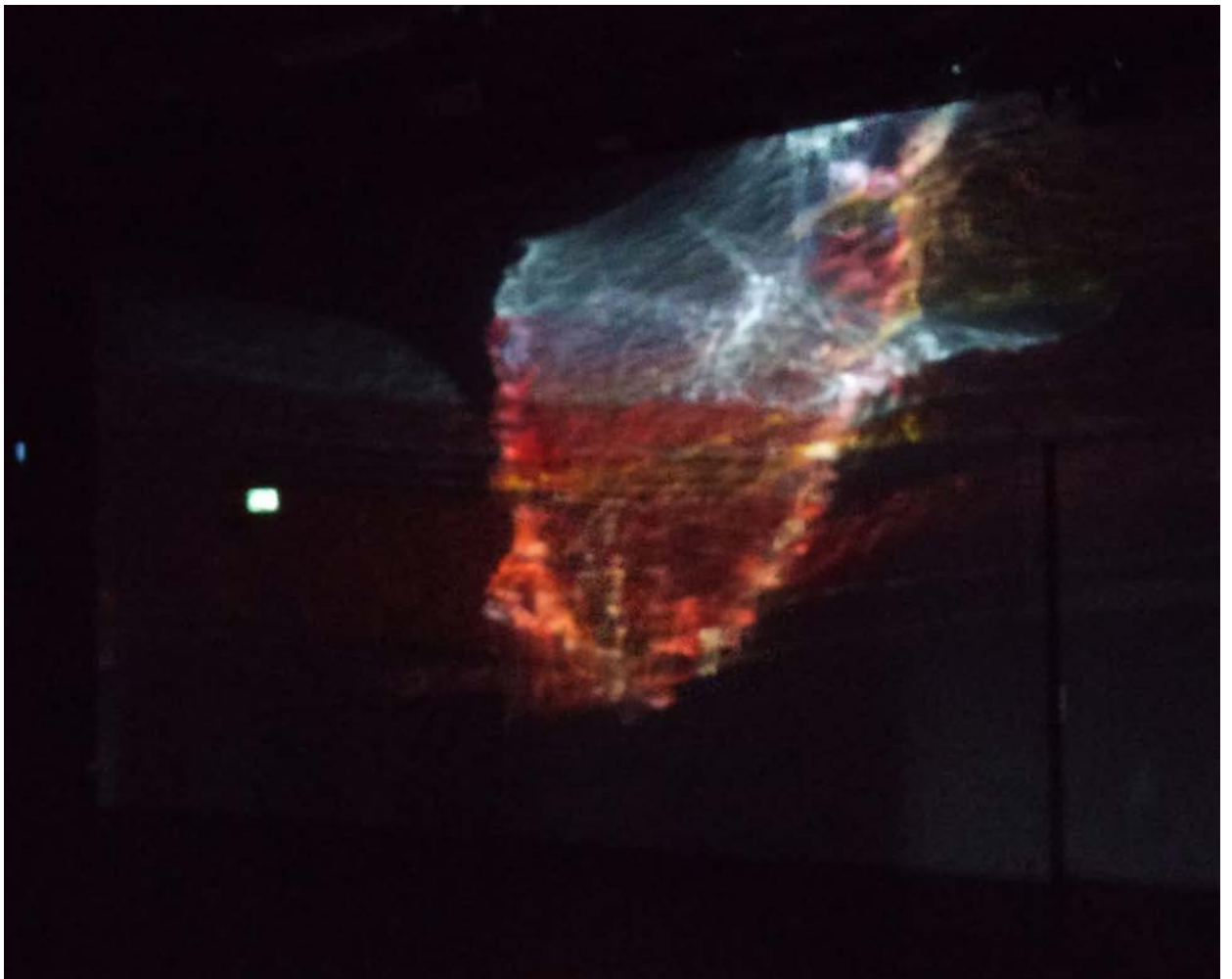
Lexington Books, 2017, p.5)

THE DARK ROOM



A membrane of reflectivity

A thin mirroring film that has the ability to turn a window glass into a semi-transparent mirroring surface is hanging inside the dark room. The thin reflective layer catches but also radically transforms the beamed image to the point of totally abstracting it : the clear picture takes the form of an obscure swarm of light and colour, waving and transfiguring with the slightest movement of the film.

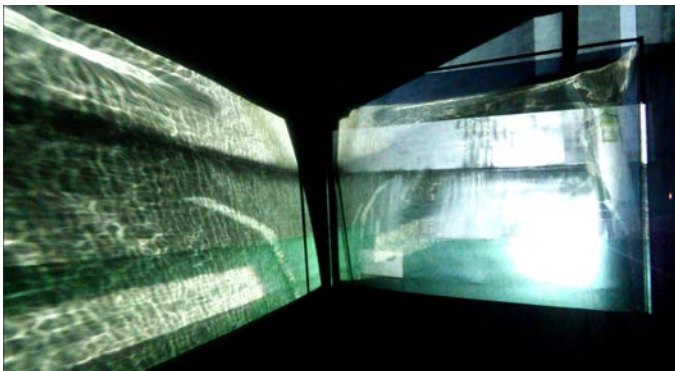


*“...the ‘ghost’ quality of reflection, its ‘supernatural’ power to generate
‘fugitive and dangerous shadows’.”*

(Elizabeth Sakellaridou, from the chapter Looking From Either Side of Glass,
Playing offstage : the theater as a presence or factor in the real world. Lanham,
Maryland : Lexington Books, 2017, p.21)

*“Through reflection, moreover, fugitive and dangerous shadows are always
reborn.”*

(Jean Starobinski, 1989: 77)



Inside the mirror, the virtual and the real collide.

Without losing its grip to reality, the mirrored object is displaced on another field. Same happens to the beamed image that, as quickly as the speed of light, reaches the wall of the dark room. Maaïke Bleeker refers to “*the relation between the body seen and the body seeing. The latter is left in the dark, ‘just looking’.*” (2008 : 15) By looking inside the mirror the seeing body instantly melds with the object seen. Do they both step into the light, or does the seeing body drag the body seen together into the darkness?



“[A]ctuality and virtuality are inseparably connected in a field of tension and the two sides of the image are completely reversible. The virtual can become actual by referring to the actual.”

(Anthony Vidler, 2000: 103)

“The mirror presents us with a flat surface [...], a medium in other words, and one that, although it is in fact the blank opposite of our bodies, yet returns our body as image. We receive an image that we take for a body.”

(Hans Belting, 2011: 17)

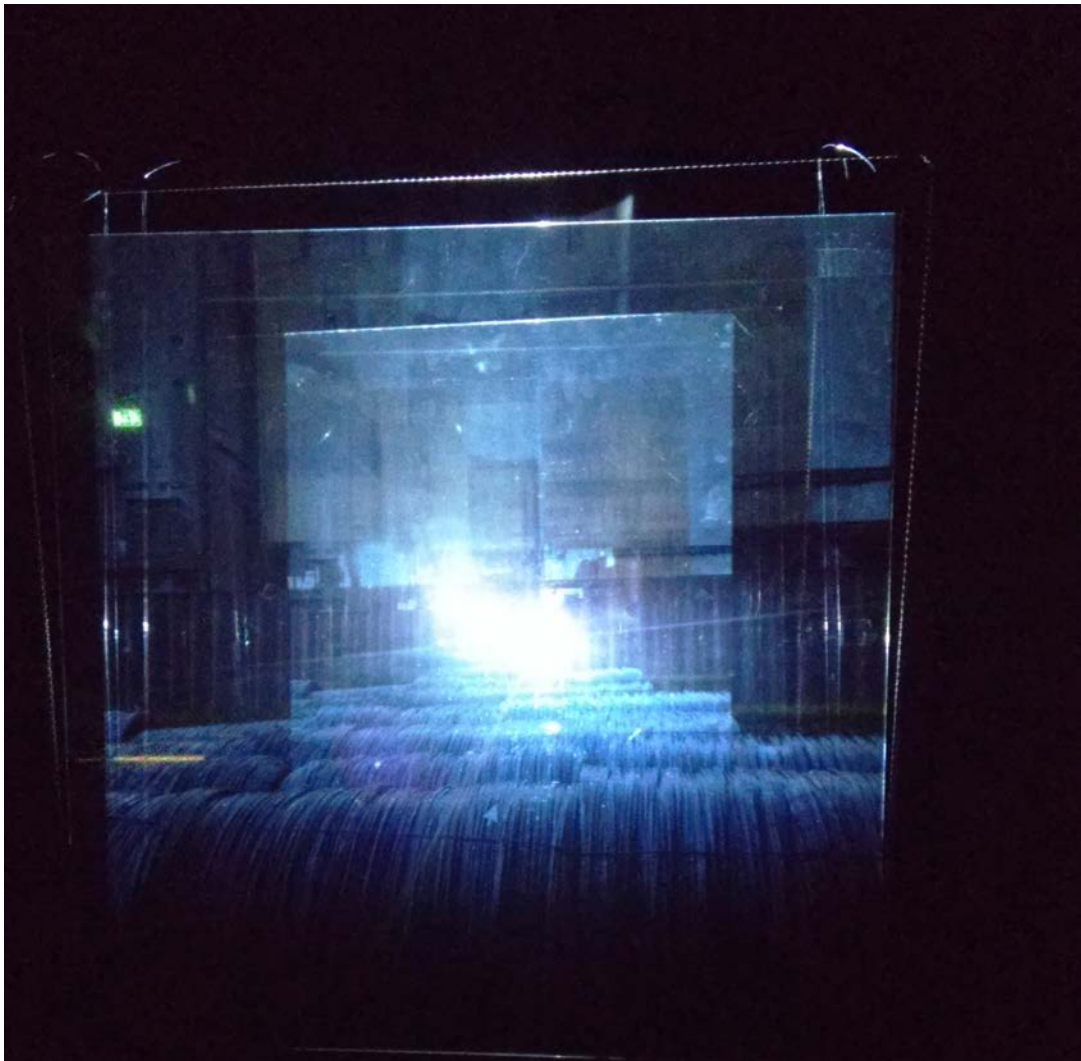
“Mirrors are like empty eyes, blind until you step in front of them - then they produce copies of my eyes, staring back at me.”

(James Elkins, 1997: 48)

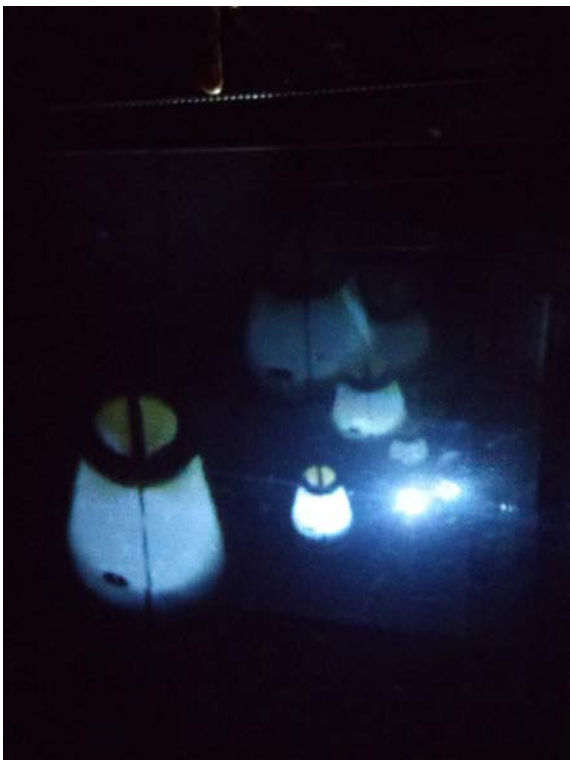


The one-way mirror

When applied on the fixed glass surface, the reflective film merges its qualities on both of them in a combination of glass and mirror : a mirror that you can see through or see your own image, a reflecting surface or one that lets the projected image travel further. The glass's transparency creates illusive worlds where the idol coexists with the instance behind the glass. This unpredictable material engages the seeing body into a fluctuating play of images of itself and other bodies, hiding and being exposed in-between light and dark patches, playing the role of an animate projection layer that carries and transforms the projected image.



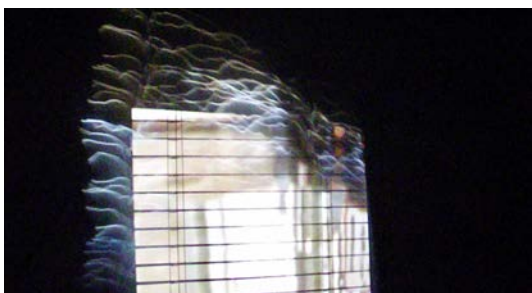
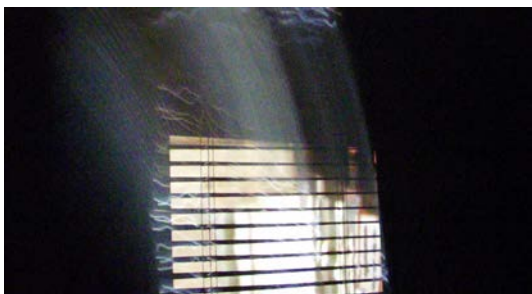
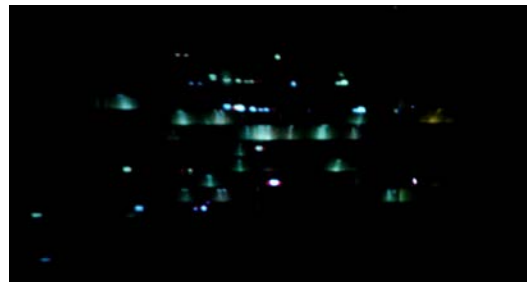
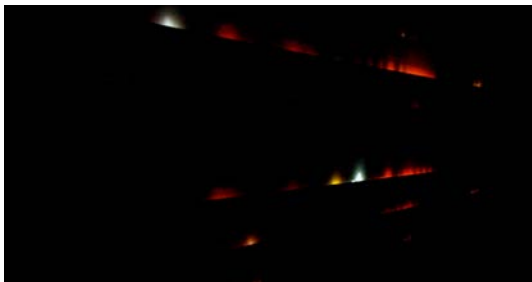
THE DARK ROOM



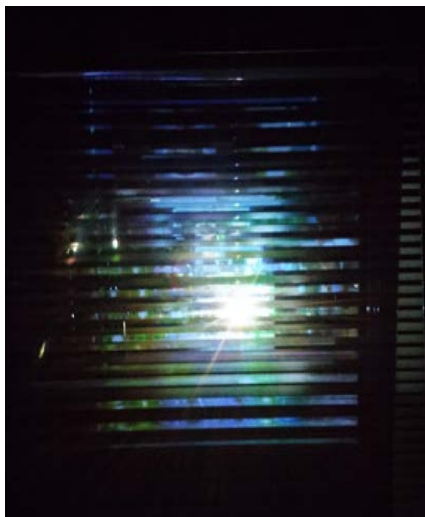
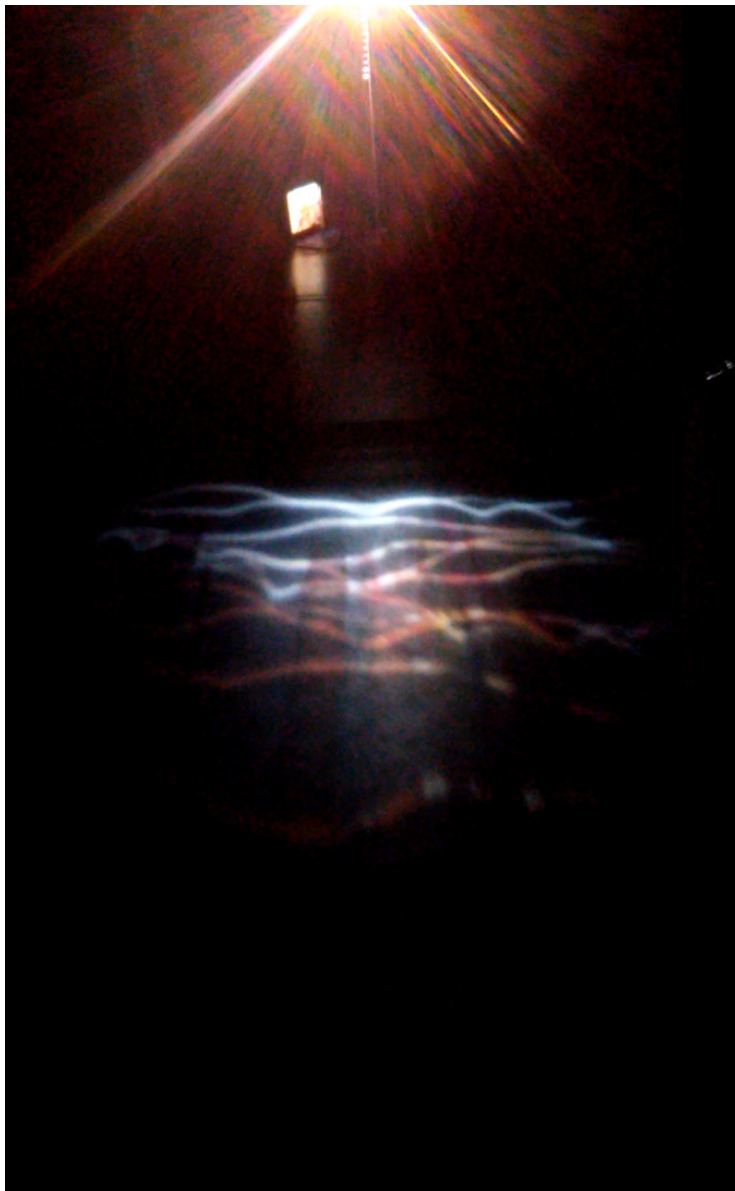
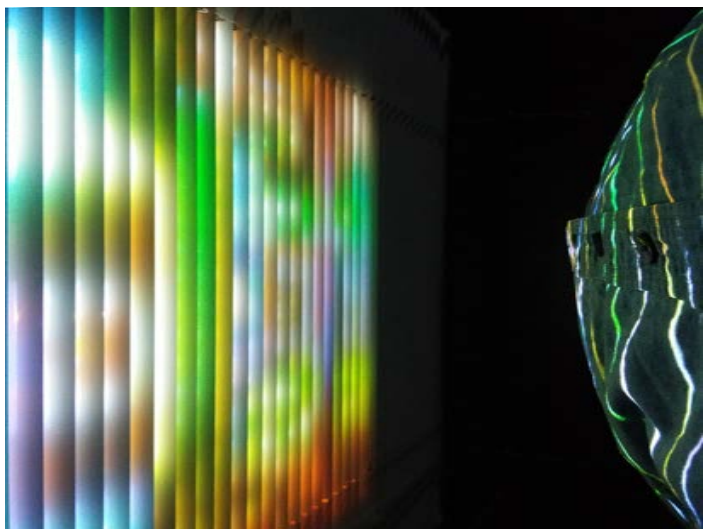
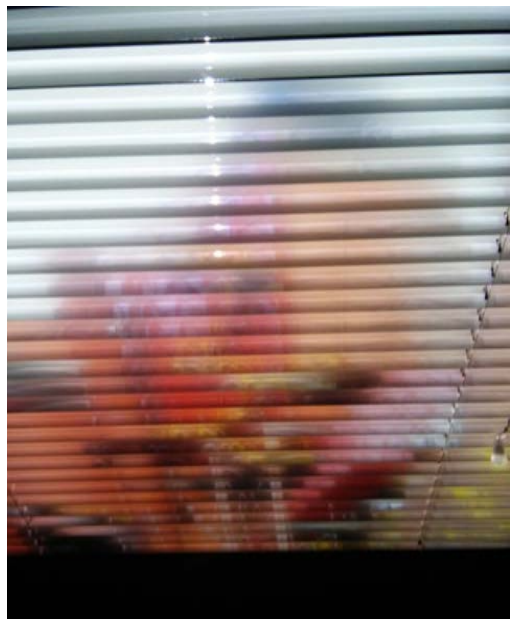
The persian blinds

An invisible window frame mounted on an imaginary wall is hanging inside the dark room. It's outline is only defined by a system of persian blinds; a beam of colours is thrown upon it. Passing through the slits of the shutters, the projected image is both shattered and doubled. What happens behind them is revealed or hidden, fully merged with the projection or distinctly separated. The rotating slats are influencing visibility but also can catch the light and generate shifting spaces and corridors of light. The projections mirrored on them are reflected as ghostly lines that resemble water reflections.

The back side of the blinds carries the projected image in a different way. What appears is a severely obscured version of the image; what is allowed to be delivered through the slats as shimmering patches of light composes a more abstracted, impressionistic picture. Taking distance from the surface allows for somewhat reducing the blurriness, like squinting your eyes, but never reaching a point of totally apprehending what you see.



THE DARK ROOM



The projector

A blinding light flashes and forces you to look away. You are confronted with an image, the result of the vertical surface intersecting the beams of light. This blind spot, the projector's eye, transmitting a framed image on a vertical plane, resembles the vantage point of a perspectival impression. This indifferent eye persistently prohibits you from looking at it, straight into the eye.



Awareness of being seen undermines the illusion of mastery of the visual field because it brings with it an awareness of being seen from a position from which one cannot see oneself.

(M. Bleeker, 2008: 152)



It is not only the vantage point that is ungraspable by the spectator, but also coinciding with the trajectory of the thrown image. With your back turned to the projector, the image turns into your own shadow; with you facing the projector, you have no choice but to close your eyes.

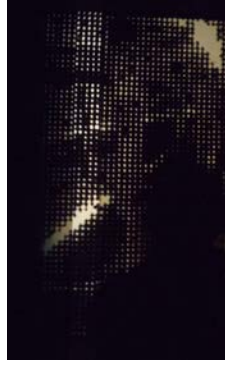
“From the moment I see my vision must be doubled by a complementary vision or another vision : myself seen from without as another would see me, installed in the midst of the visible, in the process of considering it from a certain spot.”

(H. Damisch 1995: 46)

“Bodies are revealed to the light by the shadows that they themselves create. Of themselves light and shadow are without corporeality, and yet it is with their help that we see bodies in their three-dimensionality.

They are, as it were, the natural media of the gaze.”

(H. Belting, 2011: 17-18)



“I dimly sense my own desire to fade into forms.”

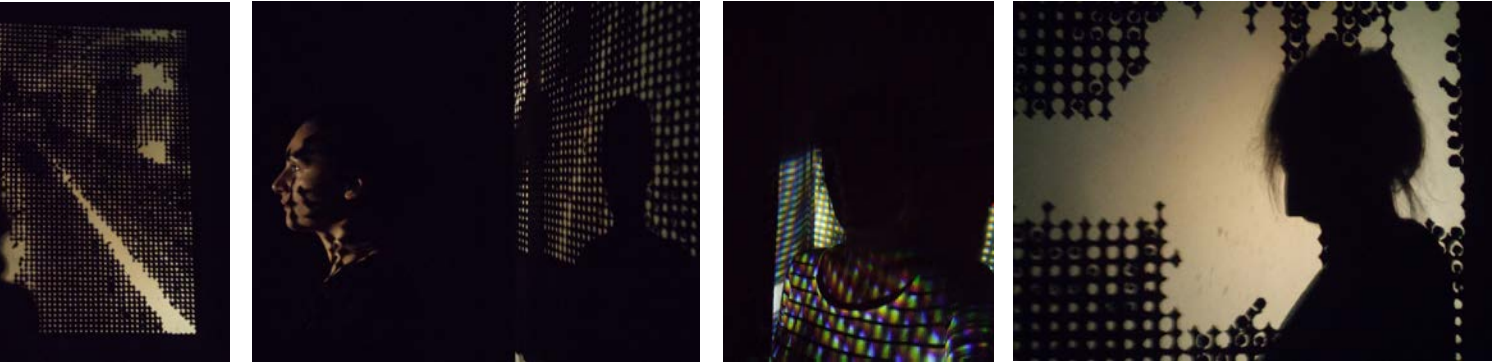
(J. Elkins, 1997: 85)

“It is indeed as though everything that is alive [...] has an urge to appear, to fit itself into the world of appearances by displaying and showing, not its ‘inner self’ but itself as an individual.

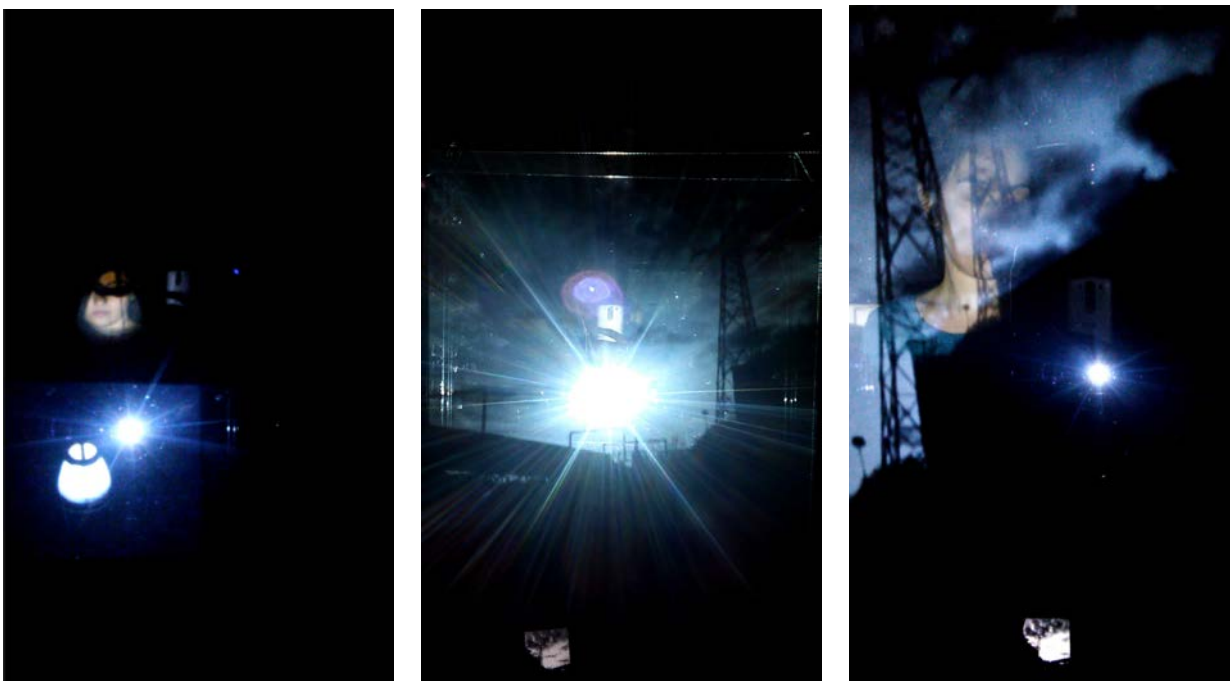
(Hannah Arendt, 1978: 29)

“It is also crucial for the functioning of the look itself that there be other looks [...] In order to release a creature or thing into its Being, we must apprehend it in its perspectival diversity. This does not mean that we should strive in all our visual transactions with that being to take account of all the possible perspectives [...] It is, moreover, vital for creatures and things that they always remain partially concealed; concealment provides protection as well as obscurity.”

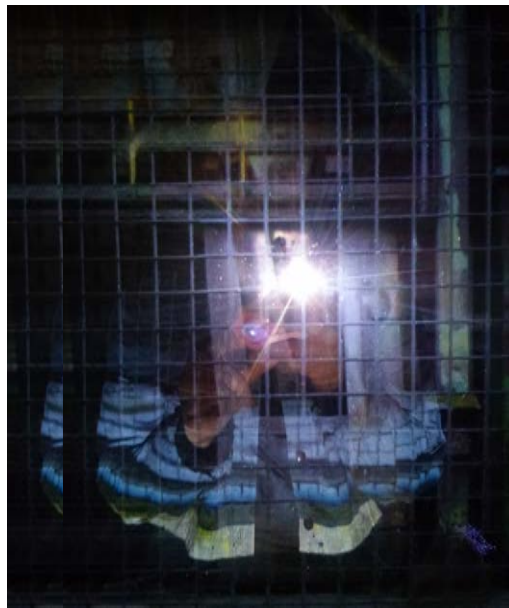
(Kaja Silverman , 2000: 26)



You sit in front of the mirroring glass. You are forced to face the blinding eye of the projector; the darkening film makes this situation somehow more comfortable. The moment you take the sit, the journey begins. You follow the light through the dark tunnel, but is it the light you are after or your own image? It is only the head that participates in this play of visions but the whole body is immersed inside the experience.



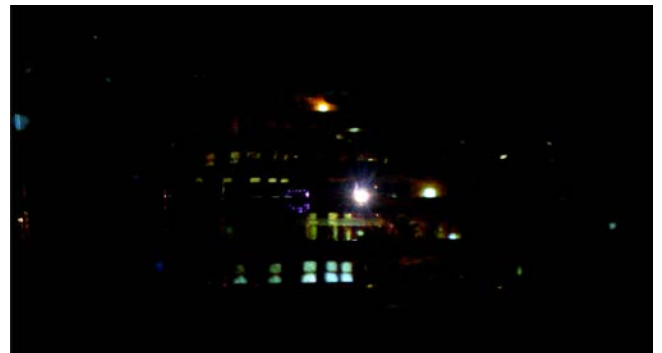
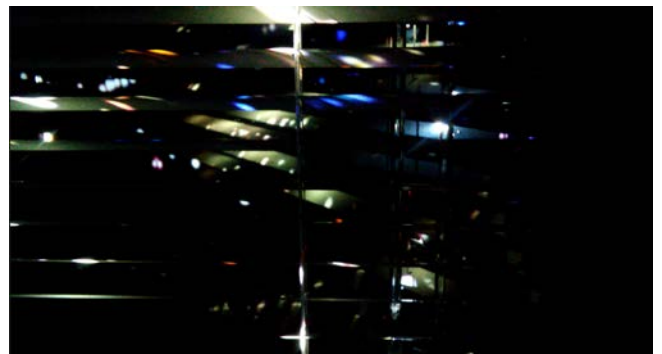
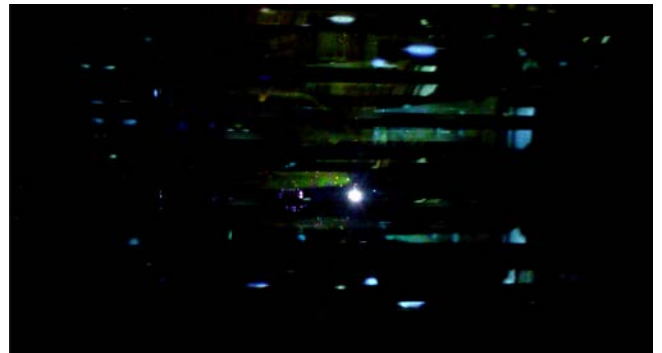
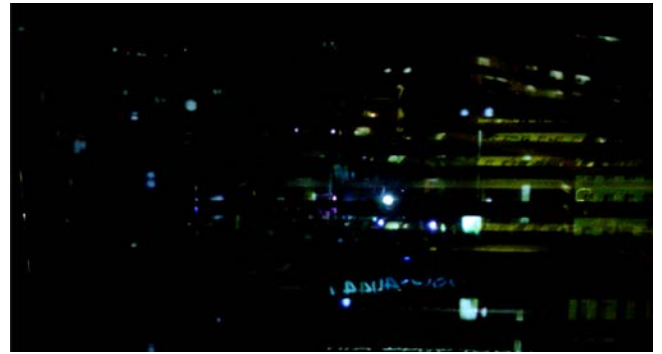
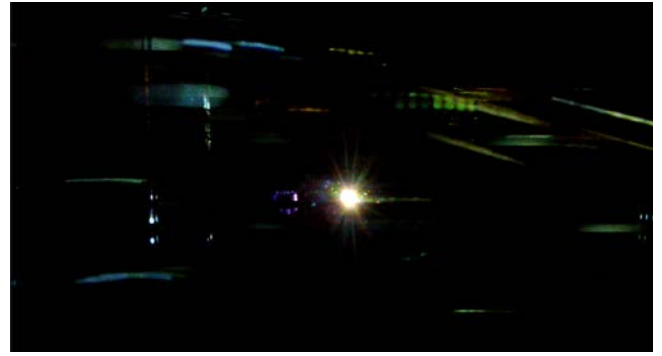
You are facing the projector, separated by its blinding light from a piece of one-way mirror. The newly constructed overlapping image becomes a virtual space where your reflecting figure resides in, in a peculiar state of not knowing exactly where it stands. Are you facing this wire fence or trapped behind it? Now you are in front, the moment after you are behind. When is the moment you trespass it?



THE DARK ROOM



Inside the dark room, you are confronted with a variety of overlapping transparent and reflective surfaces. The moment the image of the nocturnal landscape hits the mirroring translucent layers, the images of the myriads of night lights shining through the night boat trip are reflected, augmented and multiplied. They take up the entire room, transforming it into a universe filled with urban constellations.



THE DARK ROOM



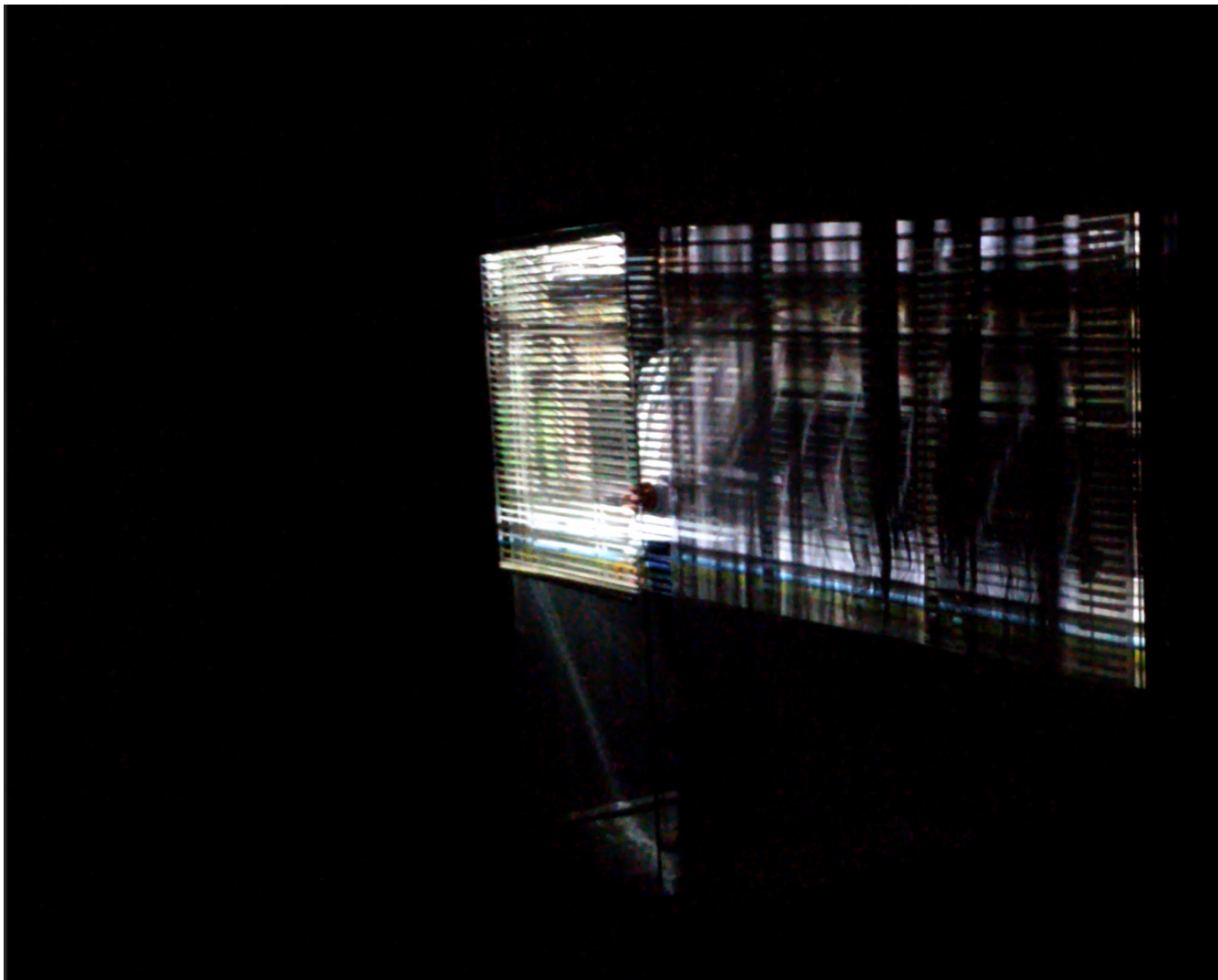
You put a minimum bending force on the plexiglass mirror. This interference is transmitted as a spectacular distortion of the reflected image. The image responds to your touch by having its edges curled, or becoming an immensely warped picture.



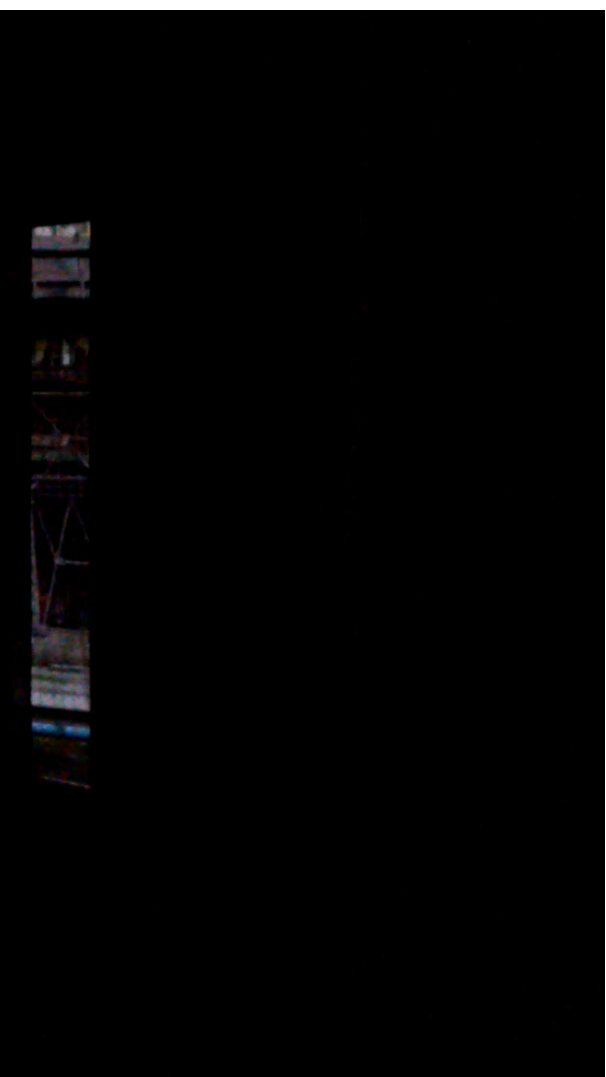
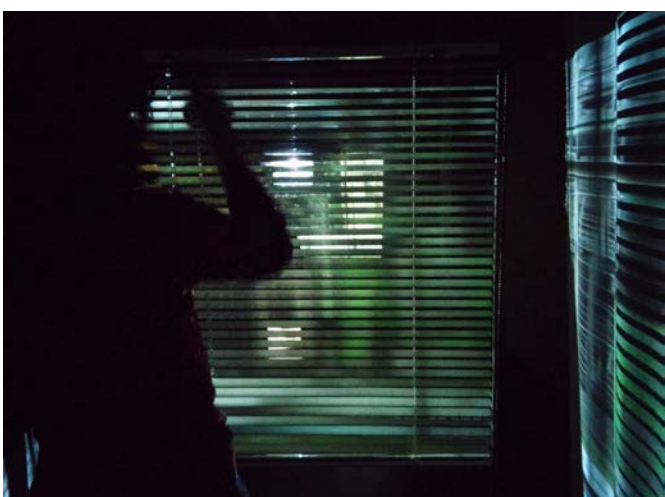
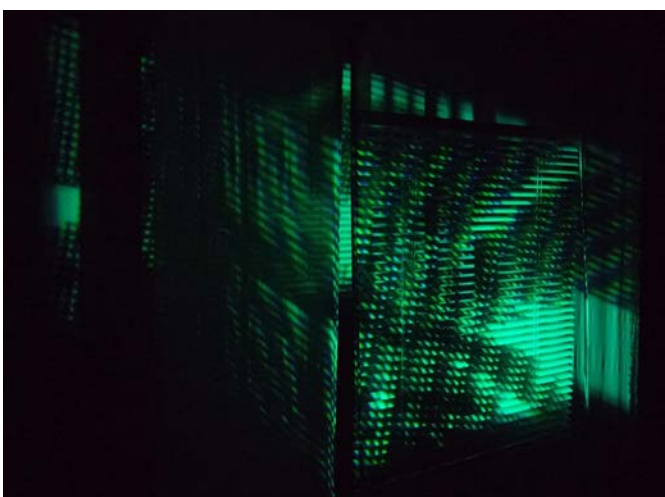
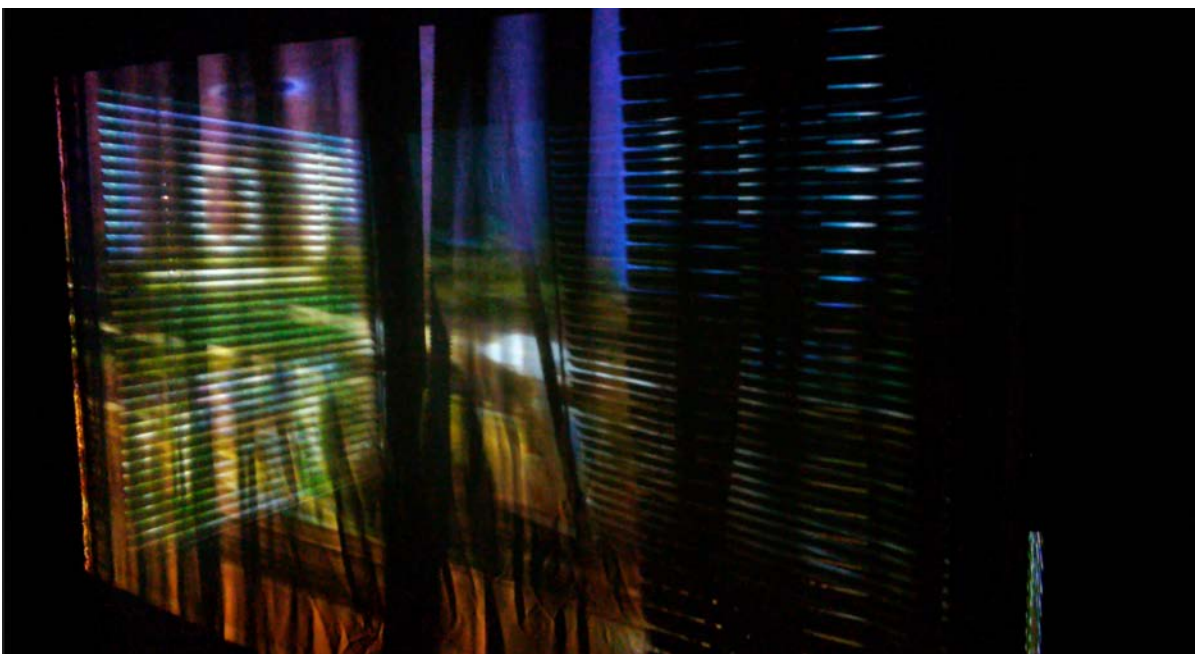
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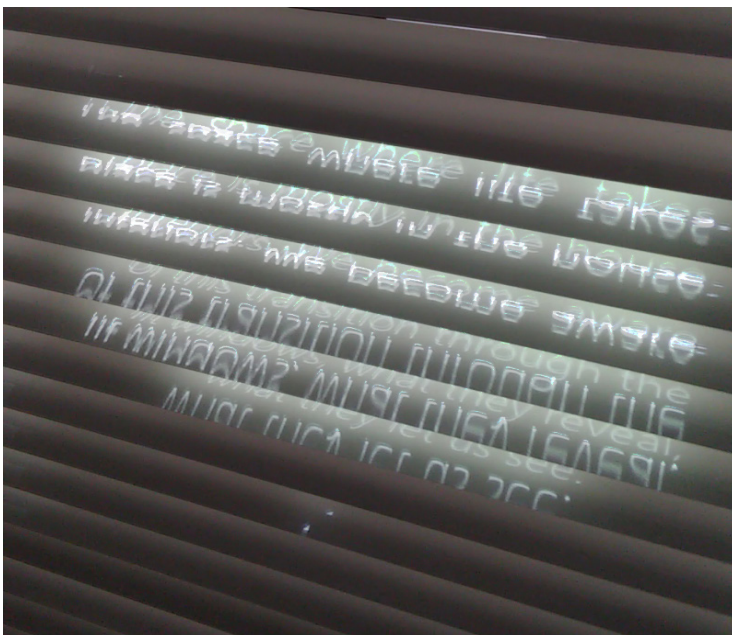
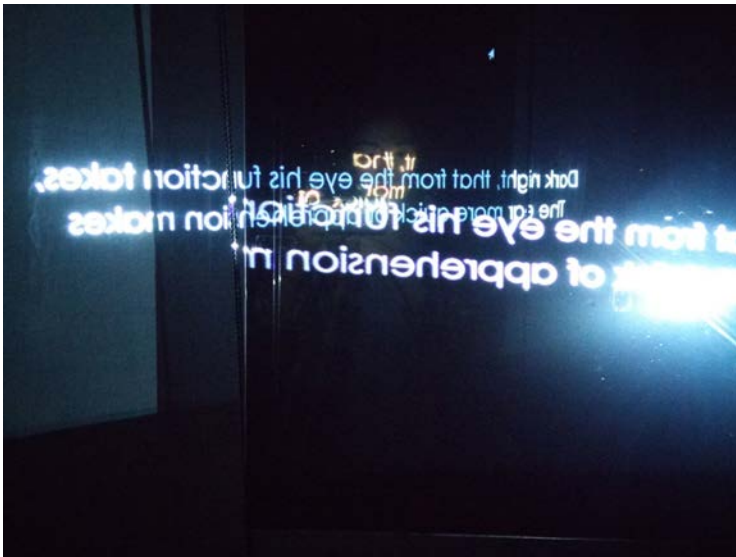
You find yourself encaged behind the persian blinds. As you rotate the slats, the projection creates a transitive space made of light. While you sit inside this virtual cube, the seer from the outside looks at your figure appearing and disappearing, vanishing behind the blinds or merging with the projected image.



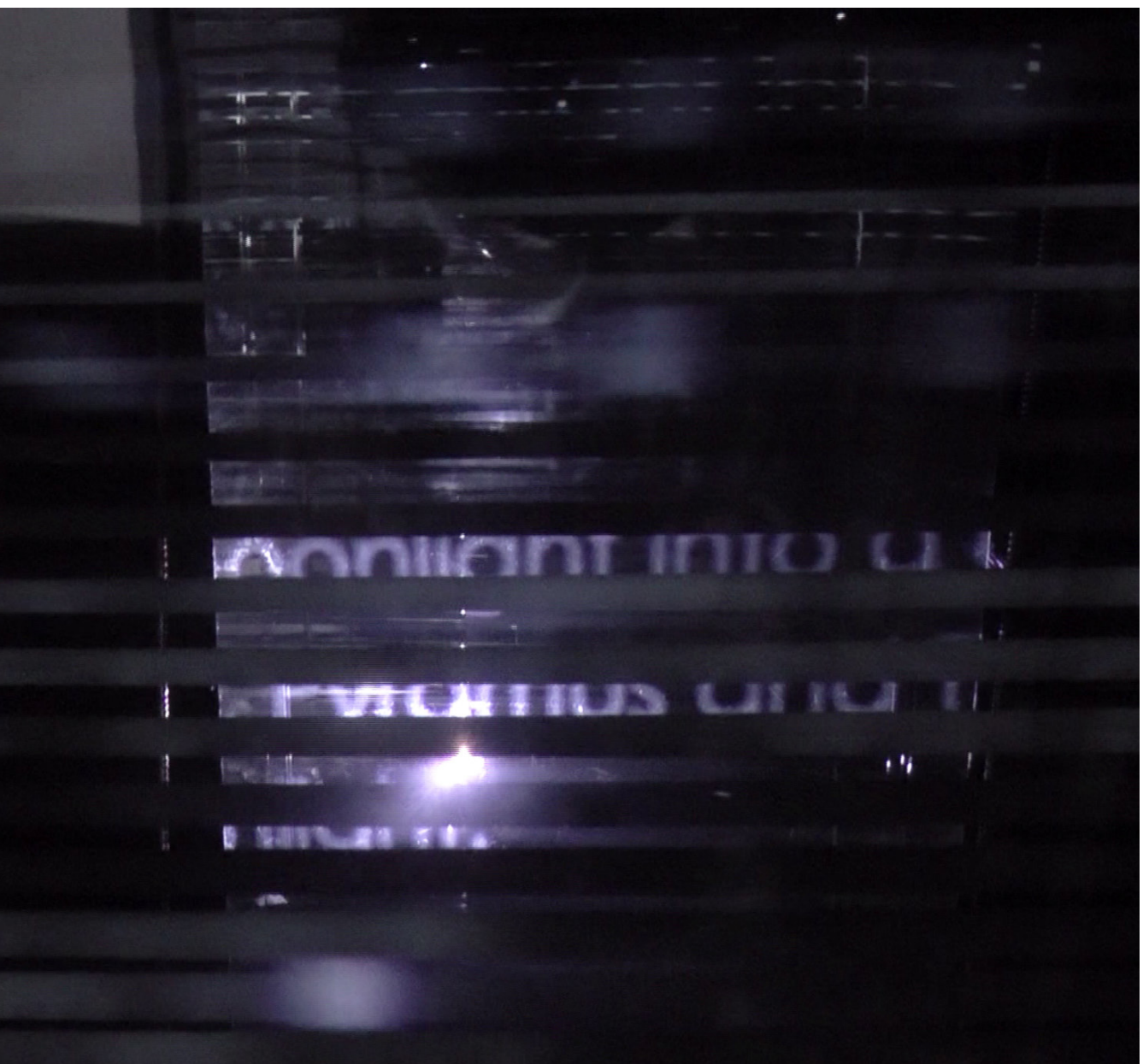
THE DARK ROOM



Letters of a fragmented text are hovering in the darkness but you can't discern what is written on the reflective surface. You move closer to see, you realize that the text is only half visible. You try to get the entire picture by rotating the slats of the blinds. Just before the image is almost completed, it transforms into another fragmented version of itself. What is revealed is instantly flipped, constantly rendering the text only partially readable.



THE DARK ROOM



“Like the process of writing, it has no end, it collapses in on itself and despairs of ever achieving closure. The artistic experiment has no utilitarian result. It is content with the adventure of finding the paths that can be taken (metahodos), and their endless labyrinthine branches are a source equally of agony and enjoyment.”

(Dieter Mersch, 2015: 20)

The starting point of each trajectory I have followed cannot be determined. It may reside somewhere deep in my past and yet define a sequence with lots of new discoveries on the way ; it might also have been kindled by never before experienced sensations that I have come along during this investigation. These pages are an attempt to define a converging territory for these paths. Oscillating between internality and extroversion, between thought processes and hands-on endeavours, between the confinement inside the dark room and the openness of urban space, my practice has never been an one-way route.

The paths taken temporarily merge inside this document and out there, in a warehouse at the outskirts of Utrecht. They will remain here for a while, awaiting for their departure into farther, unknown directions or their transformation into something new and unpredictable. After all, what is the practice of scenography if not a quest into *persistent non-knowledge*²⁰

?

20 Dieter Mersch, *The ungovernability of the scene*. The Art of Scenography // International Conference LMU Munich, 2016

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Programme Scenography

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