

waterlogged docket (extracting the image of logistics ecologies)

we are suggesting that the logic of exchange and the production of value under capitalism are analogous to photographic replication. Photography and capitalism are premised upon a fiction of endless accumulation in a finite world. A nervous vibration between the concrete and the abstract characterizes both.

(Coleman and James, *Capitalism and the Camera* 11)

on a beach at IJmuiden, the port of Amsterdam, i find myself standing between rows of little ocean-facing cabins. each are identical, nestled into the sand the dunes and facing towards the expanse of sand and ocean ahead. many of these little getaway huts sport small children's slides leading from the porches down into the avenue of sandbanks which are, as i stand there, piling up and devouring the buildings. it is an image of the good life, of leisure and isolation, of yearly excursions and childhood memories. it is mostly deserted.

a wide beach—down the coast, on my left, the historical port city of Den Helder is on full display in the distance, its docks jutting into the open ocean. in the 17th century, the watery horizon of Den Helder was broken by the English fleet, separating the city from the island of Texel, where we had been the day before. at the end of the 18th century, French revolutionary hussars captured, by land, the Dutch fleet frozen in anchor there. today, an old submarine is being repainted for show. a proud history of naval dominance.



behind me, over the village and the dunes, the smokestacks of Tata Steel pump contaminated steam into the gray sky. air pollution at the IJmuiden far exceeds the rest of the Netherlands. straight ahead, the oceanic horizon is interrupted by an enormous offshore wind farm. days earlier, citing the interruption to fishing caused by these monoliths to renewable energy, Dutch fishermen had joined the ongoing farmers' protests, blockading ports and ferries for compensation. it is difficult from my position on the beach to get a sense of the economic impact of these windmills. yet a more intrusive presence slides into my perspective, finally collapsing my sense of scale in this industrial landscape entirely: an enormous cruise ship, empty, the image of offshore paradise, rises larger than any terrestrial structure around, quietly moving into the locks of the IJmuiden on my right. i realize that the sand reclaiming this beach village into the dunes is claiming my feet as well, as i take in this panorama of industry, commercialism, and the whispers of the good life.



moving into the sea, wading into the surf, i and the two other researchers with me are surrounded by kite surfers, swarming like seagulls. they get close, showing off. we are annoyed but tolerant, silent as the watery horizon washes away our terrestrial concerns, beckoning with ancient solemnity and persistence. i am here to photograph the port space and to ruminate on the possibility of field methodology for the humanities, to think 'brackish' at an historical estuary site now divided by the locks, the largest of which (the largest in the world) currently cannot be used, as its release of salt water into the (now fresh water) ecosystem is environmentally disastrous as well as costly for the (protesting) farmers upstream. i keep my camera held high, protecting it from the salt water.



how can the economy be thought aesthetically alongside the camera? and why the sea, anyway? as it stands, 90% (by bulk) of the worlds' goods are transported at sea. logistics, the "white science" (Harney & Moten) of modernity, has, since the 1950s, consumed the political economy of the globe and subordinated the mode of production into a totality of free movement and the just-in-time. blockages in this planetary flow, however small, subsequently multiplies in intensity—the blockage of the Suez canal by the *Ever-Given* in 2021, for instance, halted \$9 billion worth of traffic per day. capitalism itself is inextricable from the aquatic highway that allowed for colonial movement and extraction at the same time that it provided the vocabulary for the globalized market that was to come. while words like 'adventure,' 'chance,' and 'fortune' can all be traced to London financiers betting on colonial enterprises in the 18th century, the fluidity of the neoliberal economy is uncannily familiar to the seas that its goods float upon. Allan Sekula, the essayist and documentarian of ship and dock labor, remains close in my mind as i walk these beaches historical for European colonialism and state-building:

We are all invited to lose ourselves at sea. For most of us, this amounts to chump change in the supermarket of imaginary danger. But my guess is that members of financial elites, especially those investing in the intangibles of the "new economy," imagine themselves in a special way to be venturing forth on stormy seas, lifted high by the irrational exuberance of the swells, only to risk being dashed down, disastrously, beneath the waves. (Allan Sekula, "Between the Net and the Deep Blue Sea" 14)

Global capitalism is a seaborne phenomenon. This simple fact gives us multiple reasons for thinking about the relationship between capitalism and the sea today. (Alex Colas and Liam Campling, *Capitalism and the Sea* 1)

my hope was that some of this ridiculous overdetermination of the port space could be figured photographically, frameable and light-sensitive, the forms of the former legible through the medium of the latter.





(in truth (and in keeping with my 'brackish methodology') i am overwhelmed by the ecology of the spaces we visit, by the sand flowing over my feet, burying the beach huts, the smell of sulfur in the mud flats, the decor of hotel lobbies, the casual pedestrianism pervading an industrial zone that should by all means be forgotten, cast aside to a remote corner of the earth to continue polluting and pillaging and boxing and pumping and leaking entirely out of site and out of mind, an infected appendix that never quite degenerates into peritonitis. its invisibility, however, belongs to another register than material opacity. for i can see it everywhere. yet nowhere can i find a friendly face with which to feel it. simply put, i have arrived to a foreign world, and i do not speak to local dialect.)





my attention turns, then, not merely to the maritime industrial aesthetic, but to the logistics ecology which has spit out the IJmuiden alongside countless other terraqueous industrial zones, relational spaces quietly connected to a planet terraformed according to an occult and hostile language, the language of profit and exploitation, of rank hierarchies and margins, of union-busting and the smell of salt mixed with bunker fuel.

a panorama, then, the wide view of everything altogether allatonce.

a panorama, however, of a world sliced and diced by the alienating forces of capital. the separation of distinct fields of work and identity into stratified and isolated enclaves. the separation of ecologies into distinct materials to be shipped across the world. the separation of real-world political events—like imperial violence and colonialism—from the distinct practices which they produced and which constituted them—photography, art, economy. everywhere cutting, parsing, seperating, erasing, seperating, extracting, shooting, trading, seperating.

In a world governed by this practice of separation, the making of discrete practices and moments out of a history of imperial violence can be defined as “photography”; in a world that prioritizes the lust to invent a device for image-making and omits the lands

stolen to produce such a lust, the discrete visual object produced out of encounters with others and made the property and wealth of some can be defined as the “photograph.” Photography should be understood as part and parcel of the imperial world, that is, the transformation of others and their modes of being into lucrative primary resources, the products of which can be owned as private property.

(Ariella Azoulay, *Capitalism and the Camera* 28)

what is a panorama of dissection? i am in the water, protecting my camera from the salt. a container ship slides by, into the channel.

[panoramas offer an entire, wide (sometimes tall) subject captured in a single frame, a closed whole backgrounded far enough that the viewer can then comfortably distance himself from it entirely as an unbiased and objective spectator. often, however, this closed system works to metaphorize the subject, such that the ‘real’ subject spills off the sides and into our imaginations. Nature panoramas, for example, bespeak an endless Nature which even the widest lens or canvas can only grasp a valley of. at sea, water always spills off the sides, leaks into the camera.]







Imagine that photography does not have its origins in the invention of the device, but in 1492.

(Ariella Azoulay, *Capitalism and the Camera* 27)

photography was invented in the years between *The Wealth of Nations* and *The Communist Manifesto*, around the same time (slightly after) the invention of the economy as object of analysis in the mid 18th century. “The emergence of philosophical-historical accounts of the division of labor, primitive accumulation, and commodity fetishism, on the one hand, and of a practical, mechanical method for fixing images, on the other, is significant” (Coleman and James, *Capitalism and the Camera* 1). just before ‘photography’ and ‘the economy,’ the term ‘fossil fuel’ was also invented, amidst the revelation that the

energy captured in ancient photosynthesis was stored in the black gold found underground and in the sea floor. i am reminded—reading this fact for the first time two weeks after submitting my thesis on the history of the oceanic aesthetics of the global economy—of Marx’s word *Gallert*, used to describe fixed capital. he likened the process to gelatinization processes, adding energy to bones and other ingredients with the potential to yield glue, melted together into a new substance that could be cooled and used later as stored and latent energy. a thermal encounter with the material.

Vaclav Smil writes that the diesel and gas engines have been the two prime movers of globalization. today they account for 85% of global energy consumption. i stare at the wind farms on the oceanic horizon, disrupting the local fishing economy. the ocean is the largest sink of excess carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, of excess heat from global warming, and is responsible for the vast majority of planetary oxygen production.

Plastic derivatives of the oil industry, bunker fuel runoff, overfishing, and the storing of CO₂ and energy from atmospheric warming create a positive feedback loop in the world's oceans: even if greenhouse gas emissions reached net-zero by the end of the century, sea levels would continue to rise until at least 2300.

(Mengel, Nauels, Rogelj, and
Schleussner, "Committed Sea-Level
Rise under the Paris Agreement and
the Legacy of Delayed Mitigation
Action" 601)



though the panorama “provided an imaginary unity and coherence to an external world that, in the context of urbanization, was increasingly incoherent”, it “was in another sense a derealization and devaluation of the individual’s viewpoint...the panorama image is consumable only as fragments, as parts that must be cognitively reassembled into an imagined whole. A structure that seems magically to overcome the fragmentation of experience in fact introduces partiality and incompleteness as constitutive elements of visual experience” (Jonathan Crary, “Gericault, the panorama, and sites of reality in the early nineteenth century” 21)

it will be ironic, then, to find that this vague devil appears most demanding in the details, where ‘totality’ is not represented literally or symbolically, but instead suggested by and deferred to in even the most minute and particular, at its most partial and incomplete. these fragments, hung however haphazardly on the walls of the Moby Dick’s Spouter Inn, whose dimness prevents all these paintings, harpoons, and other historical flotsam and jetsam from being seen clearly, taken all together, bespeak a totality they at the same time formally deny the representability of.



These things, because they are false, are infinitely closer to the truth.

(Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* 536)



the two photographs selected for the front and back covers of Allan Sekula's *Fish Story*—the bulk of a container ship jutting into open ocean on the front, the bar of a ship inclinometer on the back (placed side by side in the book (56-57))—prepare one for the kinds of scalar shifts required for thinking oceanic allegory, the vertical movements performed while cognitive mapping oceanic logistics, generating images for the ultimately unrepresentable. the ship and the containers in the first photograph act as a dimensional metaphor and mise en abyme (albeit in a rather crude way, like wowing a child with a Saturday visit to the nearby hydroelectric dam). yet the oceanic horizon that always spills off the sides of the frame suggests a different subject that forever exceeds frameability. the ocean figures for endless extension and infinity (perhaps a problematic narrativization when its unchanging albeit unpredictable waters are indeed changing quite rapidly (rising, acidifying, flushed of fish)), the maw to humble any ship.

on the other hand, the ship inclinometer, which registers the general list of a ship and its roll in rough waters, functions far more allegorically registering, as *Fish Story* of course does as a whole, totality: by symbolizing infrastructures' constant, by means of so many gauges and apparatuses, measuring and rationalizing of the material world in the great subsumption of the latter into infrastructural space, which has only to concern itself with its own preservation and functioning (the mediation and rationalization of material global flows); but also by formally invoking the representational problems which the form of the partial fragment announces (i.e. the foreclosure of panorama as a useful spatial model). the inclinometer is the technical means by which anomalies in the infrastructural network get read and 'righted' in both meanings of the word at once: the ship (hopefully) swings back upright into

the flux of just-in-time logistics. similarly, cognitive mappings (Fredric Jameson) work by way of oblique angles rather than right ones, sketching even in the minute an enormous system that would rather stay formally unilluminated, though everywhere at once felt. ship inclinometers keep the maritime gears turning; but if Sekula's picture cannot be said to suggest the exact opposite—a tipping-point promised by the brushed-metal space beyond the final legible measurement—at the very least it raises some representational dilemmas at hand in its juxtaposition to the other, grander image, which suggests totality rather differently.

panoramas have seen historical employment in state commissions, where a political narrative was disseminated through aesthetic—here painterly—forms. Sekula himself traces this modern aesthetic history to Dutch painters of the colonial era and its figurations of Dutch mercantile and maritime power, noting of Hendrick Cornelisz Vroom's *View of Hoorn* (1622):

Hoorn does not sink modestly into the sea as Dutch cities tend to do when viewed from deck level. The elevated masthead view, and the slight curvature of the coastline combine to place the city of Hoorn at the center of a global circle, with favorable offshore winds propelling ships immediately outward in their quest for wealth. (*Fish Story* 47)

the artifice of the implied narrative is highlighted by the illusionistic painterly qualities, the curve of the coastline and skewed perspective of the ships animating a particular story of centralized influence and affluence, a gravitational distortion whereby our visual imaginary bends around an impossibly dense nexus of mercantile and military power. a movement thereby occurs between the city laid out in its entirety and the global extension of its state apparatus:

In effect, this picture gives us two panoramas: one visible and contained, showing the clear profile of the city and the parallel expanse of the IJsselmeer, and the other “providential,” implied and open. This second, implied panorama extends outward at an oblique angle from the frame, along the speedy radius offered by the wind, leading to the larger expanse of the North Sea and on to the Baltic or the Indies. (ibid.)

if it would be a mistake to suggest that this is a case of the one panorama undergirding the other—the closed panorama of Hoorn, as a tangible signifier, sustaining the cognitive exploration of that second, unfigurable and obliquely-extended empire—then it is by virtue of that first panorama's artifice, amplified by its illusionism. but in reversing positions a new truth is revealed in the production of interior (modern European) space via global extraction processes: the truth of the first panorama lies precisely in its artifice, in the closure which somehow illustrates the psychological interior of the European subject.

Benjamin had noted in his own explorations of the panorama that its truth lay precisely in its closure, in the (never) arbitrary separation between the figured and the excluded or partially contained. the first panoramas, belonging to the parisian arcades of the early 19th century, were circular ‘pictures’ one stood in the center of. one felt immersed in a landscape; but the truth of the panorama would always be the interiority of the newly-confined European city-dweller.

writing about the Parisian arcades of the industrial era, Benjamin articulated that a truth of the monadic subject will be registered in the poetics of that subjects’ interior space, externalized into the closed architectural spaces that would come to dominate urban experience. The truth of the panorama, then—of a city, an arcade, or even a sea battle—is the truth of those interior subjects, and the former will in the final reading always allegorize the latter:

The interest of the panorama is in seeing the true city—the city indoors. What stands within the windowless house is the true. Moreover, the arcade, too, is a windowless house...What is true has no windows; nowhere does the true look out to the universe. (*Arcades* 532)



Azoulay sees in the panorama military optics of European imperialism. survey, identify, objectify, and conquer—the lay of the land, wrapped into the birds-eye-view, the imperialist view from above. an ideal optic viewpoint for targeting, deciding from a distance—what building goes where? who goes boom? where to mount the artillery? where to house visiting officials? the first panorama of the port Algiers was made by the French after its occupation. in it are no people. no one lives there. it is a ghostly world. but someone must have stood there, painting.



for Alberto Toscano and Jeff Kinkle, “plunging into the closed, ‘false’ perceptual worlds” of the capitalist and imperialist panorama could draw the necessary sustenance for thinking against the logics of domination and control (*Cartographies of the Absolute* 60). how exactly this happens is left unclear (the analyst is here is never situated, much like the photographer). what I suggest is that the modern panorama (if there is any other), set upon the state throne as the ocular solution to the mercantile empires, and its subsequent deposition into the detail (and even further, into data, the microeconomic figure that arose simultaneously with the panorama), reveals a conceptual collapse of the wide view which *View of Hoorn*’s trickery could not smooth over.

the ontology of photography, down to the etymology, emphasizes the affiliation with light. yet the camera and the photograph are equally about silver, metal and mining. in the exposure process, exposed silver halides are chemically reduced to elemental silver, making the image visible on the film. "In this sense, photography is light drawn to silver. to place silver, rather than light, as central to photography's ontology emphasizes the labor of the darkroom instead of the mechanism of the camera" (Siobhan Angus, *Capitalism and the Camera* 55). at a material level, the photograph is ontologically tied to capitalist extraction of minerals and to the obfuscation of labor.

but the material reality lodged inside my camera and rolled into my film strips has me thinking elsewhere, about the camera as skin the and texture of the image. the panorama arrays symbolic objects; but as Laura Marks writes about cinema, the screen is the location of hapticity as well, of feeling and texture and affect. i want to incorporate this dimension into the image. i think about this as i plunge the rolls into their chemical baths, alone, in the dark, turning silver into silver.

towards the end of Antonioni's film *Red Desert*, the characters spend a night by a harbor in the fog. the main character, unable to stand her terrestrial life, almost drives off the pier and into the invisible oceanic expanse. she would like to leave the alienation of her friends and family and embrace the texture of the abyss, the infinite opaque somnolence. i plunge the film again and again, turning silver into silver.







Selective Abstraction: the term for desalinating the salt water in the new lock at IJmuiden, the largest lock in the world. the lock that cannot be opened, because it releases too much salt water into the now-freshwater estuary. on the industrial boat tour of the IJmuiden, the guide tells us about the massive pumping station being built for this process of **Selective Abstraction**. in Dutch, the word for abstraction and extraction is the same.

[field vernaculars
embodied knowledge
epistemological autonomy
muck stuck
flotsam
jetsam
lagan
derelict]



we think about field methodology. how do we approach the field on its own terms? i venture that abstraction must happen for intelligibility. i am not satisfied with this gut feeling. i do want a photography that dots the i's of imperialism and crosses the t's of extraction.

in an estuary defined by constant movement and flux—the variously salinated water, the containers, the heaps of sand and gravel—i pull out picture after picture like relics in the desert of empire. they are defined by their stillness and their orthogonalization; the landscape, its movement and horizons of infinity. these are not images of the IJmuiden. but they are the poetics of a technical landscape. and i am in the all them.

