

Emma Nilsson

Introducing Tom Fecht's *INCERTITUDES*

"We'll see you on the other side." ¹

Incertitude: How do you imagine that which is ambiguous or unknown? And how do you visualize it? The title of Tom Fecht's most recent series of works establishes an existentially precarious state of destabilization. Incertitude implies the motivation of pushing forward into the unknown, of advancing one step further than one would normally go - without any safety net and with no guarantee in terms of result.

What is it that can *essentially* be seen in these works? An abstract picture, held entirely in black and white, subdivided by a narrow, jet black horizontal bar at its lower border, and an infinitely fine black-and-white field with a granularity that takes up the largest part of the picture until it loses itself deep within the sphere-like curvature of the nocturnal pictorial space at the upper border. The works in the series vary, above all, in the different degree of their granular refinement, a fineness that enables a specific photographic grain structure and interference pattern unique for each of these vintage prints². The black horizon provides the weight, forms the focus of the picture, and thus supports the eye in order to grasp the fineness of the granularity, which already begins to oscillate gently upon first sight. Although each and every micrograin can be identified by the naked eye, it is their diversity and density that exceed our capacity of getting even close to any exact number.

Each attempt to count them seems to be in vain and only leads to an infinite loop out of which, despite our efforts, it is impossible to escape. On the contrary, the more the eye focuses, the more the photographic surface begins to oscillate in a shimmering, flickering way. The navigation of the eye gradually begins to fail in this no-man's-land, unable to find its place of departure. This visual experience is based on a negative that was exposed for many hours on well-aged sheets of silver gelatin film, yet it is only seemingly related to classic analog photography. Here, the focus lies beyond representation and the visible spectrum. Such a vintage print can no longer be effectively reproduced without losing its unique magic.

¹ The words of astronaut James Lovell on Apollo 8 before disappearing behind the moon, the first time in history that men had been occulted.

² In this series of works, the silver crystals diminish in size by ten gradations from the most course ISO 6400 grain with extremely high light sensitivity via ISO 3200, 1600, 800, 400, 200, 100, 50, and 25 down to the dust-like ISO 10 microcrystals.

Our habits of perception tempt us to think of the starry nocturnal sky over imaginary horizons. Here, however, it is not the stars that we see high above us in the night, not the starry sky that prehistoric man painted repeatedly on the walls of his caves. In this series of works, the starry sky steps into the background and a nocturnal sky of stars extinguished long ago manifests itself in photography's "black matter." To be more precise, countless silver halide microcrystals are exposed to the light of stars extinguished billions or millions of light years ago -and in this manner, it can produce an immense refinement of even granularity. What we are therefore directly confronted with is an abstraction of that age-old prehistoric light. We look into the dark and simultaneously into a dimension of time that is difficult to grasp. Our present coincides with an inaccessible, temporal cosmic depth on these two-dimensional sheets of photographic paper.

Time and time again, art has sought to capture -or even touch- the universe. Vija Celmins, Anish Kapoor, Anselm Kiefer, Yayoi Kusama, Wolfgang Tillmans, Thomas Ruff, or Hiroshi Sugimoto are but a few prominent artists in recent decades who have pinned their gaze into the very depths of the cosmos, attempting to make outer space tangible or the connection between man and the cosmos perceptible.

In doing so, the viewer always tends to look into a profoundly deep night, into the black that has had a quality of transformation ever since antiquity. The separation of darkness from light, of night from day, creates the world and creates life. The view into this void of black matter looks into something absolute, absolute because nothing is to be seen. With open eyes, the viewer turns blind, as it were, and can see nothing, or: cannot see anything. In seeing nothing, the gaze is reflected backwards; it turns inwards and returns to the viewer. "*Shut your eyes and see*" are the words with which James Joyce conjures up this human gaze in *Ulysses* - a gaze that unfolds from within and only exists there.

Our imagination easily makes us forget that looking at the nocturnal starry sky is always historic. In doing so, we do not look into the future, nor into the present, but into a deep past light years away. Stargazing unknowingly transforms us into time travelers, thus into a starry night that childhood's innocence fires back. Here, imagination defies science, an unfamiliar new world view of space-time and quantum physics. This subatomic world, in which certitude becomes the exception and incertitude the dynamic standard, is inaccessible for the naked eye and entirely alien to us.

Provided we accept the uncertainties of these *Incertitudes*, we can look deep into the night and are capable of seeing the invisible. Outer space becomes magically transparent through these photographs. The invisible emerges on the photographic paper in the form of a minimalist abstraction oscillating between black-and-white dots. It does not represent a direct copy of space, but it nevertheless mirrors its resonance. When we follow Joyce's invitation to shut our eyes in order to see, then our senses are stimulated and seduced to perceive these images more profoundly

over and beyond the initial visual impulse. On account of the “shimmering” of the granules caused by the interferences, the dots and silver-like crystals, the impression of oscillations, the ease, and cosmic resonance, we effortlessly move into the sphere of sounds, into an acoustic space where these crystalline vibrations swing into the audible realm. Here, a musical language can be found that has mutated to notation by means of photography. Dense and undirected crystalline clusters seem to spread melodically within the spatial suspense comparable to an optical-acoustic shadow image. The Incertitude-Series may by implication also be read as *Études*, as analog compositions or studies of photographic instruments.

Tom Fecht’s *Incertitudes* offer the possibility of opening up an incredible sense of transparency for us. Seen as alchemical notations or photographic gestures, they tempt us to step beyond the known into the void and they remind our intuition to penetrate the unknown with all of our senses. “*It is one thing, to penetrate the night. But to be penetrated by the night, that means being overtaken by an experience much older and greater than us*”³.

Thus, these *Études* may also imply exercising the experience of being deeply gripped, which has become so rare these days. For the light that has not only aged billions of times but also left its traces on these photographic scores has already moved on through the infinity of space. Moved on after it was captured for a fleeting moment and while we, as viewers of the *Incertitudes*, are instinctively thrown with all of our senses into a simultaneity with that unimaginable dimension of time. In order to tentatively approach the imaginary space-time reality warped by gravity, it is simply not enough to embrace the unknown -it also requires the silent urge to jump out of our very own skin.

The text compiles excerpts from Emma Nilsson’s comprehensive introduction for Tom Fecht’s upcoming portfolio *INCERTITUDES*. The fine art edition will include a series of 10 Silverfirmaments 56 x 80 cm on Baryta silver gelatin paper. The unique vintage prints are based on 10 refined ISO graduations and will be accompanied by *BLACK MATTERS*, a scientific essay by Gérard Klein, Paris - an author often regarded as the grey eminence of the global Science Fiction community. The portfolio edition will be limited to 7 copies + 3 AP to be published in fall 2018. For further information please contact the gallery.

Emma Nilsson is an art historian, curator and art consultant currently based in Lugano, Switzerland. She also studied musicology, literature and Scandinavian studies and served over the past years as a founding director of Setareh Gallery, Düsseldorf. She co-founded *Transhuman Art Critics* with *Kraftwerk* musician Emil Schult, the duo’s multimedia performance toured recently in China, the UK and Germany.

³ As Tom Fecht likes to put it in homage to the American painter Agnes Martin.



*"I like to think that my cameras have ears,
and to listen with my eyes."*

Tom Fecht launched his artistic career in 1992 at Jan Hoet's Documenta IX. In the late 1990s, he embraced photography as his preferred medium. Since then, he has produced an extensive body of landscape and portrait work. In recent years, he became particularly known for his seascapes and night photography focusing on phenomena invisible to the naked eye. His large-scale minimalist works cross the line between the physical world and the invisible, magical aspect of the universe while pushing photography to the edge of quantum physics.

Inspired by the Apollo moon missions, Fecht studied cybernetics, engineering, and art history at Columbia University in New York and at Technische Universität in Berlin. As a young engineer, Fecht was involved in developing fax machines and computer-based imaging at IBM. In the 1970s, he founded the gallery and publishing company *Elefanten Press* in Berlin. Over the next two decades, Fecht worked as a gallerist, a publisher, and an editor focusing on documentary and artistic photography. Fecht enjoys exploring photography as a tool in art, architecture, and design. He also teaches at the Royal College of Art and at Imperial College in London, currently conducting scientific research on a new generation of scientific lenses while exploring the thermodynamic potential of silver gelatins.

As of 2012, his photographic works have been limited to the unique vintage print. His work is regularly presented at TEFAF Maastricht and New York and has featured in numerous museum exhibitions and collections, including at the Neue National Galerie and Martin-Gropius-Bau in Berlin; Hamburger Kunsthalle; Bundeskunsthalle, Bonn; Royal College of Art, London; Helmhaus Zürich; Museum DKM, Duisburg; Museum Folkwang Essen; MuCEM Marseille; Musée des Beaux-Arts LAAC, Dunkerque and Musée des Beaux-Arts de Liège, Belgium. His work is also widely represented in both corporate and private collections across Europe, North America, and Asia.