PHOTOGRAPH, PRESENCE, AND MATERIALITY IN THE WORK OF VIJA CELMINS

by

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(Under the Direction of Isabelle Loring Wallace)

ABSTRACT

This text treats the drawings, paintings, and prints of Latvian-born American artist Vija Celmins as a systematic engagement with the embattled ideal of the photograph. The themes that dominate her artistic output—the sea, the sky, and the spider web; treated in chapters two, three, and four respectively—will be the structure around which this text attempts to grapple with the foundational questions posed by her pictures and their engagement with photography. Chapter two addresses the ways in which the historical paradigms of landscape and the sublime may be present in Celmins's work. Chapter three examines the complex rhetorics of presence and absence engendered by the highly articulated physicality of her images. Chapter four attends to Celmins's possibly embedded citation of the formal structures of the grid and perspective.

INDEX WORDS: Vija Celmins, Ocean, Sea, Sky, Space, Spider, Web, Photograph, Presence, Materiality

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A.B., Harvard University, 2006

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of The University of Georgia in Partial

Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

MASTER OF ARTS

ATHENS, GEORGIA

2009

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May 2009

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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I begin with a little-discussed image by an understudied artist. To say something

manifest about Vija Celmins's drawing *Plane* (1968, fig. 1): it is a picture of a picture.

That is, the image, a scrupulously rendered tour-de-force in graphite, contains a second

image: that of a photograph of an airplane, haphazardly ripped from its previous home.

The resultant whole compresses the two into an uncomfortably coincident space.

Leaving aside the thorny complexities of such a structure for a moment, we are led to

dwell on *Plane*'s tiny moments of meticulous particularity—an exercise in which Celmins

has preceded us. "I crawl over the photograph like an ant and I document my crawling

on another surface," she has said.[1] So, too, do our eyes amble over this surface,

invited by its modest palette and unassuming size to linger over its imperceptible

strokes. Fully three-quarters of the drawing's surface is given to a mutely undulating

sea of grisaille on top of which the torn photograph appears to hover. This ground

stretches nearly end-to-end over the picture plane, a mostly-even layer of graphite that

terminates abruptly near the periphery of the woven paper. Close inspection reveals

subtle gullies furrowing the apparently monolithic terrain: a troika of paler diagonal

bands just below the photograph, a dissonant swath of erasure in the upper left corner.

And on top of it all: the illusion of the photograph itself, tenuously attached to the gray

ground by a pair of trompe-l'oeil staples, one at each top corner. A third staple, no

longer attached, impotently peers out from the shadow of the photograph at bottom

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[1] Vija Celmins, Thelma Golden, et. al., "Interview with Vija Celmins." *Art21: Art in the Twenty-First Century* (New York, Harry N. Abrams, 2001), 162.

right, tantalizingly close to the staple-width tear it caused at the photograph's edge. The

photo yearns to rip away from the ground at this edge; it is an image in transition. And if

the photograph itself seems to insinuate movement, so too does its subject: the body of

the airplane sits sidelong on the orthogonal axis, implying movement in the

photographic field. Its position within that field with respect to the viewer remains

somewhat difficult to discern: two equally (un)likely interpretations emerge. Seen one

way, the darkest portion of the plane represents its underside, dictating that the plane

flies away from the viewer. Alternatively, one might interpret the bright highlight at the

front of the plane to signify the propeller. For the propeller to be visible in this position,

the plane would be flying towards the viewer, with its body receding into space from

front to back. Neither of these propositions is ultimately satisfying, leaving the figure in

a constant state of oscillation between the two. The refusal of the airplane to settle

finally and conclusively within the photographic field resonates with the photograph

itself, which similarly threatens to flutter away and out of its tenuously fixed position.

You might say the drawing stages an extended engagement with the idea of

fixity, both in space and in time. To return to that staple: it points to a time that has now

expired—a time when the contiguity of the staple and the photograph was still intact.

The drawing quotes this sign of fixity just to undermine it, leaving it literally

overshadowed by the image of the airplane. But that sign, too—the photograph—is

likewise a document of a time that has necessarily passed: through the apparatus of the

camera, the photograph shares an indexical link to a fixed moment in time that is always

antecedent to our own. Further, the very existence of the photograph—the emergence

of this particular technology—might be understood as indicative of a desire to still, to

freeze, to fix. In its explicit foregrounding and exploration of such themes, this early image portends concerns that will mark Celmins's work for the next forty years: stillness, the perfect copy, photography. Christian Metz, discussing the intimate link between photography and death, posits the photograph as "an instantaneous abduction of the object out of the world into another world."[2] The photograph, with its relentless and dutifully rigid crop, carves out its subject from the limitless fields of space and time. So, much as the source photograph abducts the airplane out of its world, Celmins kidnaps the kidnapper: she literally tears the photograph from its original context. To find sources for such images, Celmins admits to "going through bookstores, finding war books and tearing out little clippings of aeroplanes, bombed out places—nostalgic images."[3] Other work from around this time seems to draw from similar sources: *Burning Plane* (1965), *Suspended Plane* (1966), and *Zeppelin* (1966) all treat their stolen subjects in a similarly austere style and palette, while *German Plane* (1966), *Bikini* (1968), and *Hiroshima* (1968) make more pointed references to the events and symbols of World War II.

The artist's background everywhere informs this work. When Vija Celmins was born in 1938, her native Latvia was a sovereign nation. Within two years, the Soviet Union forced annexation; Nazi occupation of the country followed soon after. When Soviet forces threatened re-invasion in 1944, Celmins and her family fled to a Latvian refugee camp in Esslingen, Germany before ultimately securing passage to New York City in 1948. The family finally settled in Indianapolis, far from the drone of military

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[2] Christian Metz, "Photography and Fetish," *October* 34 (Autumn 1985): 82.
[3] Vija Celmins, Chuck Close, and William S. Bartman, *Vija Celmins* (New York: A.R.T. Press, 1992), 16.

planes and the lockstep stomp of wartime soldiers. Celmins remained in Indianapolis to

earn her BFA from John Herron Art Institute in 1962. She became an American citizen

in the same year. A scholarship earned on the merit of her undergraduate work brought

her to UCLA to study drawing and painting, where she began exploring gestural

markmaking in the Abstract Expressionist style. This idiom she quickly mastered and

just as readily eschewed, on the grounds that she "couldn't resolve the stroke-making

with the essential stillness of the painting."[4] Her understanding of the "essential

stillness" of the image would become foundational for her successive practice.   While

the lurid color and grandiose sensibility of Ab-Ex may seem worlds away from

apparently ascetic images like *Plane*, Celmins's abiding interest in the end-to-end

treatment of the picture plane suggests a more comprehensive engagement with the

style than the images might initially imply.

In her early work, Celmins married such stateside influences with an apparent

interest in the more formally rigorous European tradition. To cite this latter quality, we

need only look so far as Gerhard Richter, whose work is often noted as a parallel to that

of Celmins. And with good reason: Richter was born in Germany a mere six years

before Celmins, and photography plays a foundational role for both artists. The

comparison holds particular salience for our subject here, since Richter produced his

own series of airplane paintings from 1963-1964. It is highly unlikely that Celmins knew

of this work before she began her own explorations of the theme.[5] Richter was

relatively unknown outside of Germany until the late 1960s; his first group show in the

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[4] Ibid.
[5] Christopher Knight, "Vija Celmins' Picture Planes," *Art Issues* (January-February 1992): 15.

United States did not occur until May 1969 in New York.[6] The striking consonance of the two bodies of work, therefore, remains all the more remarkable due to the artists' mutual ignorance of one another. Consider, for instance, Richter's *Scharzler* (1964, fig. 2): like *Plane*, the painting features an airplane photograph within an otherwise desolate pictorial field. The image has been clipped from a newspaper, evidenced by the snippets of regularized typeface surrounding the photograph. The coloring too, though nominally in grayscale, betrays that distinctive jaundiced pallor that characterizes aging newsprint. Similar to *Plane*'s minutely variegated gray ground, the picture plane surrounding *Scharzler*'s news clipping swells and billows with subtle gradation, even as it remains placeless and noncommittal. Within the photograph, the airplane occupies a frontal position in an ambiguous pictorial field. The plane, its landing gear deployed, appears to travel from left to right over a pale strip—a runway, perhaps—running roughly parallel with the photo's bottom border. Backed by what appears to be a thicket of trees in the middle distance, the silhouette of the airplane remains relatively intelligible, even as its details are muddied in a horizontal blurring effect.

In its isolation and its general structure, then, *Scharzler* bears an uncanny resemblance to our *Plane*. Yet, the connection should not be overstated: the two bodies of work to which these pictures belong remain distinct. The scale of *Scharzler*, at 100 x 130 cm, enlarges the source image so that the subject and the accompanying text become totally magnified, yet oddly lacking in specific detail. Celmins's drawing, by contrast, retains modest dimensions that belie its muted gravity; nine *Planes* could fit inside one *Scharzler*. But the most striking disparity between these two, and the most

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[6] Robert Storr and Gerhard Richter, *Gerhard Richter: Forty Years of Painting* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2002), 334.

pertinent for our purposes here, is the difference in treatment: Richter smears the wet

painted surface to create his trademark blur, while Celmins remains dutifully committed

to the faithful recapitulation of the exactitude of the photograph and its flat surface. At

first pass, they seem like wildly divergent impulses: on the one hand, to obscure the

clarity of photographic reproduction and on the other, to mimic it. In fact, both strategies

can be seen to embrace, and perhaps even amplify, the expected characteristics of the

photograph. According to Richter, he used his blurring technique "to make everything

equally important and equally unimportant."[7] The uncanny equivalence conferred by

the photograph onto its subjects has long been a quality closely associated with the

medium;[8] Richter's technique might be understood to literalize such an association in

formal terms.[9] Further, Richter claims to use the blur as a means to yield a

"technological, smooth, and perfect" aesthetic—terms that could easily apply to the

photographic image in general.[10] Such an approach echoes Celmins's investment in

the photograph as a "cold, scientific image which tends to transform as it is re-made." [11]

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[7] Gerhard Richter, *The Daily Practice of Painting: Writings and Interviews 1962-1993* (London: Thames and Hudson in association with the Anthony d'Offay Gallery, 1995): 35.
[8] See for instance Francis Frith. "The Art of Photography," in *Art in Theory 1815-1900: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, edited by Charles Harrison, Paul Wood and Jason Gaiger (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1998): 662-666.
[9] Such an understanding is not inconsistent with other theories of Richter's blur, which have been discussed at length elsewhere, e.g.: Gertrud Koch, "The Richter-Scale of Blur," *October* 62 (Autumn 1992): 133-142; Rosemary Hawker, "The Idiom of Photography as the Truth in Painting," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 101 (Summer 2002): 541-554; Kristian Hvidtvelt Nielsen, "Nanotech, Blur, and Tragedy in Recent Artworks by Gerhard Richter," *Leonardo* 41 (2008): 484-492.
[10] Richter 35.
[11] Vija Celmins, qtd. in Robert Enright, "Tender Touches: An Interview with Vija Celmins," *Border Crossings* 87 (2003): 29.

There is something about the photograph, then, which particularly motivates the pictures of both Celmins and Richter. Given the subject matter of these airplane images, we might be tempted, as others have done, to associate their use of the photograph with "a memory of the rain of destruction with which these particular planes threaten civilization"—that is, to situate them with respect to a childhood marred by World War II.[12] This kind of strictly biographical interpretation is possible, and even seductive, because of the intimate function photographs perform for the functioning of memory. The photograph serves both as an indexical document of the physical conditions of the past and as an iconic image thereof. Its authority in the functioning of memory therefore derives from its dual status as both physical evidence and supreme likeness.[13] To extend this kind of reading with regard to the images under discussion: Celmins often works in series, revisiting the same themes, the same photographs, again and again. Her oeuvre in general is consumed with the idea of repetition, entangled with the process of reiteration. It is not inconceivable, then, that one might understand her exploration of the plane imagery to be reflective of an ongoing engagement with a past personal trauma (in this instance, her war-torn childhood). Our interpretation of the image therefore becomes all bound up in the (mostly speculative) particularities of Celmins's experience, perhaps to the detriment of the more nuanced readings her quiet and ambiguous pictures demand. In a similar vein, the existing literature on Celmins

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[12] John T. Paoletti, "Gerhard Richter: Ambiguity as an Agent of Awareness," *The Print Collector's Newsletter* 19 no. 1 (1988): 2.

[13] Jay Prosser, *Light in the Dark Room: Photography and Loss* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005): 58.

has largely relied on the facts of the artist's biography in its attempts to reconcile the apparent ambiguity of her images.[14]

This text acknowledges the allure of biographical analyses of Celmins's early pictures, and will make a point to incorporate her personal story wherever appropriate. Further, the ensuing pages, in the interest of attending to Celmins's later themes, will seek to address the photograph's role in these early images. Her successive pictures, however, remain somewhat more resistant to the sort of biographical interpretive framework we have surveyed here, since overtly object-based references fall out of her images almost entirely by 1970. What remains after the airplanes nosedive out of them is that other kind of plane—the two-dimensional one. The gently lapping surface of an expansive sea, the glow of galaxies against a black and distant curtain, the fragile intersections of a spider web: these are her subjects from the 1970s through today. All of these, like *Untitled (Ocean)* (1968, fig. 3), are mediated by the conceit of the photograph, and all are stretched nearly end-to-end over the picture plane, evincing an all-over aesthetic. They predominantly maintain a modest and manageable size; at 36 by 48 cm, *Untitled (Ocean)* typifies this aspect.

What then, of these? Such pictures, in their collective nod towards flatness, seem everywhere indicative of an art historical moment inflected by the embattled ideal of medium specificity; indeed, the first of these works appeared less than a decade after Clement Greenberg's "Modernist Painting" in 1960. Following such an observation, we might go on to find in these drawings a formal critique of the picture plane and its

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[14] E.g., Dave Hickey, "Vija Celmins: The Path Itself," in Judith Tannenbaum, ed., *Vija Celmins* (Philadelphia: ICA, 1992). See also Mark Daniel Cohen, "Vija Celmins: The Sublimity of Memory," *NY ARTS* (July-August 2001); and James Lingwood, *Vija Celmins* (London: ICA, 1996).

properties, a rational extension of the formal medium to its logical ends; the pictures

themselves bear out such an exegesis, to a certain extent. But by 1968, Greenberg's

prescription of self-criticality (in the form of non-narrative flatness) as pictorial art's

natural, teleological goal was roundly impeached by the images of such artists as

Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, and Andy Warhol. It was during this period of re-

evaluation that Celmins produced her first mature works, a group in which *Plane*

occupies a prominent role.

Upon her entry onto the Los Angeles art scene, critics immediately aligned Vija

Celmins with Warhol and the larger Pop movement, and understandably so.[15] Her

earliest paintings, which featured everyday objects depicted with a matter-of-fact

frontality, certainly betray the early influence of Pop.   It was her subsequent

appropriation of the mass-media photograph as a source for her practice, however, that

cemented her connection with the style. Nowhere is her link to Warhol more evident

than in her *Time Magazine Cover* (1965), a faithful depiction of its subject as it

appeared on newsstands on August 20, 1965. The cover featured photographs

depicting the L.A. race riots of that year: storefronts aflame, figures wandering a littered

street, shattered glass surrounding an overturned Oldsmobile. In its content and

general treatment, the painting directly echoes the so-called "death and disaster"

paintings Warhol produced around the same time. Like her engagement with Abstract

Expressionism, however, her overt involvement with the themes and strategies of Pop

proved to be as brief as it was rigorous. If the abiding qualities she preserved from her

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[15] To cite but a few of many early examples: Lucy Lippard, *Pop Art* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1966); Rosalind G. Wholden, "Los Angeles," *Arts* (December 1964), 20; S.R. Snyder, "Los Angeles," *ARTFORUM* (May 1966), 16.

affair with Ab-Ex were an all-over sensibility and an interest in the tension between planarity and depth, from Pop she gleaned a foundational understanding of the power of the photograph to structure its own reiteration.

Images like *Plane* stand as a testament to Celmins's ability to consolidate such disparate influences in a manner that remained personally resonant and artistically generative. As we have noted, her art comes of age in a highly charged moment for picture-making: she may have launched her investigation of the photograph in the Pop vernacular, but her sustained dialogue with the medium bespeaks a more expansive approach that transcends the style's slick demeanor. Her dominant themes in the ensuing decades—the sea, the sky, and the spider web; treated in chapters two, three, and four respectively—will be the structure around which this text attempts to grapple with the foundational questions posed by her pictures and their engagement with photography. In their treatment of these subjects, the pictures at first pass seem to retain the frigidity and reticence of the photographs from which they derive, hard-boiled in their adherence to formal severity. Yet in the persistent presence of the human form, meeting the yearning search of the human gaze, their impassivity thaws. Seconds, then minutes pass as the physicality of these images seems to grow and intensify. In fact, the change occurs not in their material form but in our own: our eyes grow accustomed to their subtle gradations, our bodies naturally gravitate to their sensuous presence. What these pictures want is to be seen, yes, but further: they demand to be reckoned with, in all their physical and material fullness. This text attempts to do just that: to look closely, to attend to their presence in the service of apprehending what they might ultimately have to say about the absence inherent to representation.
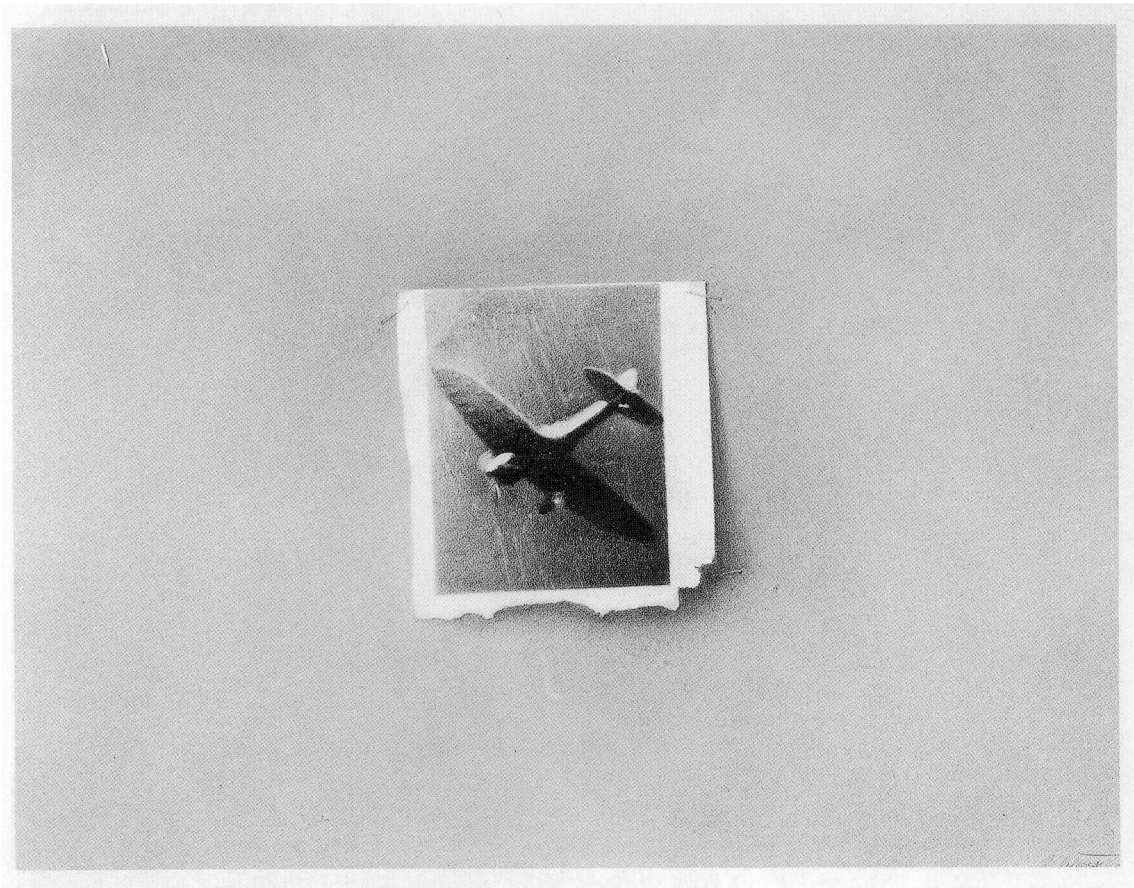
Figure 1
Vija Celmins
Plane, 1968
graphite on acrylic ground on paper, 34.9 x 47.2 cm
Cambridge, Mass.: Fogg Art Museum

Figure 2
Gerhard Richter
Scharzler, 1964
oil on canvas, 100 x 130 cm
private collection

Figure 3
Vija Celmins
Untitled (Ocean), 1968
graphite on acrylic ground on paper, 35 x 47 cm
private collection

CHAPTER 2: SEA

Rendered in graphite on acrylic-coated paper, Celmins's drawing *Untitled (Ocean)* (1968) features a sweeping expanse of open sea as captured in a photograph that was taken by Celmins herself. The ocean's surface swells and ripples with the movement of the water; the alternating crests and troughs of waves demand the full range of values from Celmins's pencil. As we earlier saw in *Plane* (from the same year), the picture plane brusquely terminates near the edges, resolving in a graphite-free one-centimeter margin that contains the picture. Like *Plane*, too, *Untitled (Ocean)* invites close observation and extended reflection, entreating the viewer to come ever closer and to endure a bit longer. But even as the image solicits the physical presence of the human form with its own sensuous materiality, the desolate field of representation remains notably bereft of signs of the human figure. Further, in its formal structure, the drawing explicitly disallows the imagined entry of the human form. *Untitled (Ocean)* is plainly *not* a window that offers the viewer a prospect into a fictive three-dimensional space, but neither is it the "pure surface" that blocks such a view. The implication of three dimensions, the hidden tension of the ocean's depth, still alluringly beckon from beyond the surface of the sea (of the drawing, of the photograph). This image—along with the substantial group of similar drawings for which it will nominally stand in this chapter—is therefore predicated on an explicitly staged tension between planarity and depth. Further, *Untitled (Ocean)* maps this tension onto a dynamic oscillation between presence and absence: on the one hand, the unabashed presence of the drawing's

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heavily worked materiality, and on the other, the utter absence and total exclusion of the human figure. The photograph, as we will see through Celmins's translation of the medium, is especially equipped to aid in the transmission of such ideas.

Although Celmins's reconsideration of the photograph is a decidedly 20th-century gesture, *Untitled (Ocean)* does, strictly speaking, belong to a genre practically as old as art itself: landscape. While there is no visible land of which to speak, the picture does present the viewer with a sweeping vista over a natural physical feature of the earth. But of course, this classification is uncomfortable at best: since the treatment of the image is entirely edge-to-edge and nearly coincident with the surface of the water, there exists no horizon line from which the viewer may orient his position with respect to the pictorial field. Further, the traditional organization of a landscape image depends upon a clearly defined foreground, middle ground, and background[16]—a delineation rendered impossible due to the image's overhead viewpoint, elimination of horizon, and lack of scale. This is not to say that spatial recession is entirely absent in the drawing; due to discernible differences in the comparative scale of the waves, there remains a gradual yet noticeable recession into the pictorial field. This illusion of depth, however, remains entirely unmoored from that system of pictorial organization that has ruled Western images for centuries: perspective.

What is it about the medium of photography, then, that permits Celmins to pin down the endless spaces that populate images like *Untitled (Ocean)*? The answer to such a question must surely begin with a consideration of the photograph's associated

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[16] A rule that has been codified in any number of treatises on art since the sixteenth century. See, for instance, Francisco Pacheco, "The Art of Painting, its Antiquity and Greatness," in Zahira Veliz, ed., *Artists' Techniques in Golden Age Spain: Six Treatises in Translation* (Cambridge and London: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 93-95.

essential characteristics. Like other two-dimensional forms of spatial representation (such as [most] painting and drawing), photography purports to denote three-dimensional space on a two-dimensional plane. The resultant object, therefore, remains utterly flat: the photograph compresses—"pins down," one might say—potentially endless depth into a finite and delimited plane. Of course, the photograph not only restricts the depth of the pictorial field but also its breadth: the intransigent boundaries of the photograph excise its subject from a limitless external terrain.

The unlimited sweep of space from which the photograph demarcates its subject parallels the continuum of time it likewise disrupts.   In the instant of the photographic take, the camera fixes the action of its subject, severing it from the endless elision of moments to which it originally belonged while propelling it forward into another kind of time altogether. The first, instantaneous duration of the photograph—that of the fixed exposure time—consequently unfurls into the spectator's continuous present: the space and time inside its borders remains utterly inert while time outside marches on unabated.[17] The rhetorical power of this unique condition of photography—suspended animation, stilled likeness, passing from one time and state into another—has quite forcefully aligned the medium with the finality of death.[18] Celmins, too, draws a correlation between photography and death; for her, the space of the photograph represents "dead space" which then tends to "warm up as it is re-made."[19] This intimate link between photography and death is compounded by the *physical* connection

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[17] Metz, 84.

[18] This connection is perhaps most famously and elegantly presented in Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981); I am also quite fond of its later iteration in Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Picador, 1990): 70-75.

[19] Qtd. in Enright, 29.

photographs bear with their subjects. As Charles Sanders Peirce noted, photographs

are "physically forced to correspond point by point to nature," resulting in an indexical

document of the effect of reflected light on a photographically treated surface.[20] As

such, photographs bespeak an indexical relationship to a necessarily expired physical

past; they act both as the document and the agent of a kind of "death-of-moment." And

this connection should not be understood as merely accidental or coincidental: as

Peirce emphasizes, the desire for the photograph to correspond to the physical reality of

nature expressly motivated its invention and subsequent rise to prominence in visual

culture.

     The subject of the photograph within Celmins's *Untitled (Ocean)*—the surface of

the sea—explicitly foregrounds the seminal attributes of photography we have surveyed

here. In its utter planarity, the water's surface prefigures the formal plane compressed

and produced by the photographic take. At once conjuring and impeding spatial

recession, the surface of the ocean also implies depth while refusing visual access to it.

Further, the seemingly limitless expanse of the ocean's surface parallels the likewise

infinite visual field from which all photographs steal their subjects. The ocean therefore

might be understood to stand in for the universe of potential photographic subjects—an

uncomfortably polysemic association, since the photograph itself is defined by its status

as "the absolute Particular, the sovereign Contingency, matte and somehow stupid, the

This."[21] But particularity remains especially difficult to locate in *Untitled (Ocean)*. There

are no visual cues with which to localize the subject, no identifiable topographic

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[20] Charles Sanders Peirce, *Collected Writings Volume 2.*, ed. Charles Hartshorne, Paul
Weiss & Arthur W. Burks (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1931-58), 281.
[21] Barthes, 4.

configurations allowing the viewer to pin down its specific coordinates. Placeless, the

subject thus remains, and just as formless: the ocean, in its utterly mutable and fluid

nature, explicitly refuses visible coherence and structure. So, too, has the medium of

photography been understood as bereft of form;[22] Barthes famously characterized the

popular understanding of the photograph as a "weightless, transparent envelope," which

subsequently becomes indissoluble from its referent.[23]

To recount, then: *Untitled (Ocean)* features a vast, expansive landscape of the

open sea, its depth unfathomable and literally unseen. In its pictorial organization, it

eschews the triumphant rationality of Western perspective, opting instead for a

relational articulation of depth that leaves the viewer unable to situate himself finally and

conclusively with respect to the image. In such characteristics, the image perhaps

unavoidably invokes the aesthetic experience of the sublime.[24] Associated since the

18th century with the unfathomable vastness of nature in the face of human reason, the

sublime seems a particularly apt paradigm with which to approach this picture (and the

many others like it that populate Celmins's oeuvre). The seemingly unbounded surface

of an expansive sea certainly appears, at first pass, to fit the qualities we traditionally

associate with the sublime. For Burke, "terror" represented "the ruling principle of the

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[22] Hubert Damisch, "Five Notes for a Phenomenology of the Photographic Image," *October* 5 (Summer, 1978): 71.
[23] Barthes, 4.
[24] The sublime as an aesthetic category has been theorized (and consequently revised) at length. This text considers these as foundational sources for its argument: Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1990); Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgment* (New York: Hafner Publishing Company, 1951); Jean-Francois Lyotard, *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime*, trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994).

sublime," which was chiefly to be found in the expansiveness of nature.[25] Ultimately,

the analytic of the sublime endows human reason with the power to negate this terror

and disengage it effects. The unobstructed prospect of the ocean's surface was, for

Burke, particularly apposite to arouse such a feeling; "the ocean is an object of no small

terror," he claimed, and one which actually trumps the corresponding vastness in an

open tract of land.[26] The suitability of the ocean's surface to invoke the sublime was no

doubt due to the pertinence with which it fit Burke's other conditions. Of all Burke's

ideas of vastness—of "length, height, or depth"—it was depth, for him, which most

successfully intimated feelings of horror.[27] The depth of Celmins's field remains, of

course, unknowable—and therefore possibly infinite. And infinity inspires "that sort of

delightful horror, which is the most genuine effect, and the truest test of the sublime."[28]

This drawing, ostensibly of the ocean itself, might be understood therefore not only to

invoke the Burkian sublime, but in fact to stand as a primordial example thereof. And,

given our earlier discussion of presence and absence in these pictures, it seems

especially germane to invoke a concept that predicates itself on oscillation between the

constitution of terror and its effective negation.

     And yet. Look again at *Untitled (Ocean)*: its sea isn't boundless or unfathomably

vast in effect. At least it isn't *any longer*, since the photograph has already truncated its

limitlessness prior to the arrival of Celmins's pencil, preempting the viewer's rational

mind of its triumph over nature. Celmins reminds the viewer of this fact at the limits of

the picture, in the blank whiteness of the margin: "Because my images tend to run on,

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[25] Burke, 56.
[26] Ibid.
[27] Ibid., 67.
[28] Ibid.

as if they went on forever, they have to be carefully ended," she explains.[29] By calling

attention to the boundedness of photographic representation, Celmins underscores its

role in "defining, circulating, and debasing the ideals of sublime nature," as Cécile

Whiting has noted.[30] In so doing, she posits the photograph as a structure that

symbolizes the viewer's rational mind in its ability to disengage—and thus to bound, to

demarcate, to *fix*—the terror associated with the sublime experience.

Here, we have teased out a structural and associative consonance between the

photograph's object (the ocean) and Celmins's object (the photograph). Provocatively

for our purposes, such a parallel between these objects begs a similar correspondence

between their respective subjects; that is to say, Celmins's mode of representation

might fruitfully be likened to that of a camera. Indeed, much as the camera scans its

objects, transcribing them into a two-dimensional plane, Celmins treats "the photograph

as an object, an object to scan."[31] Further, she has characterized her practice as a

"dumb" kind of representation in which she ascertains "what happens when I see

something in front of me and translate it onto a two-dimensional plane."[32] And, of

course, the term "photography" stems from the Greek *phos*, meaning "light," and

graphis, meaning "drawing"—literally, drawing with light. Both the camera and Celmins

draw what they see; rather provocatively in this case, what they *see* (and thus what we

see) is the *sea*. This semiological kinship in Celmins's work between the linguistic signs

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[29] Samantha Rippner, *The Prints of Vija Celmins* (New York/New Haven/London: The Metropolitan Museum of Art/Yale University Press, 2002), 14-15.
[30] Cécile Whiting, *Pop L.A.: Art and the City in the 1960s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 58.
[31] Celmins, Close, Bartman; 16.
[32] Vija Celmins, qtd. in Susan Larsen, "A Conversation with Vija Celmins," *Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art Journal* 20 (October 1978): 37.

of representation and their iconic counterparts should not be overlooked. Much as

Celmins earlier exploited both word and image in *Plane* to emphasize the utter planarity

of the drawing, so, too, does she employ similar tactics here to indicate that what's on

display is both a record of the sea and a record of seeing. We might understand

Untitled (Ocean), therefore, as a reconsideration of the photograph it depicts, using

analogous terms to re-make the photographic image. But such an action inevitably

begs the subsequent question: *why re-make the photograph at all?*

The photograph, due to the indexical relationship it shares with its referent, has

long been accorded value based on its ability to function as physical evidence. This

value is consolidated by the camera's seemingly mechanical and objective operation,

which appears to preclude human bias and intervention. The photograph, therefore,

becomes aligned with that traditionally unequivocal and perennial truth to be found in

the index. In its supposed ability to communicate such truth, the photograph stakes "an

authoritative claim to meaning," implying autonomy from subjective experience and

interpretation.[33] Authoritative, objective, and autonomous, the photograph wants

nothing: it is defined (for better or worse) by its capacity to deliver an image of physical

truth, unaided and unabated. It is, in a way, always already complete.

By re-making the photograph, Celmins's *Untitled (Ocean)* implies an alternative

state of affairs. To attend to the photograph in all its fullness, to add to its hermetic

totality, is to mark it as functionally inadequate in its prior state. Celmins's gesture—

dutifully, tenderly translating the photographic image into graphite—may thus be read as

a supplemental one, by turns masking and underscoring some foundational inadequacy

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[33] Craig Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism," *October* 12 (Spring, 1980): 69.

inherent to the photographic medium. Indeed, Derrida characterized the logic of the

supplement as seeming to naturalize the prior term, even while it disguises the lack

inherent to that term that the supplement presupposes. For him, the relationship of

writing to speech is the preeminent example of supplementarity, where writing as a

supplement denotes the natural insufficiency of speech—because to be supplemented

is to have a prior state of incompletion. The prior term is thus always characterized by

an absence to which the supplement ostensibly attends.

Of course, the Derridean conception of the *supplément* remains deliberately

ambiguous: *suppléer* can mean either "to supplement" or "to supplant." So it is with the

functioning of the supplement: it remains always ambiguous whether the supplement

operates as an addition, "a plenitude enriching another plenitude, the fullest measure of

presence," or if in fact it supplants the original term, adding "only to replace."[34] For

Derrida, the supplement ultimately functions in both ways simultaneously, as both

"accretion and substitution."[35] Thus, the supplement oscillates between modalities of

pure presence and mitigated absence. To characterize Celmins's touch as a

supplemental gesture, then, is to begin to assimilate some central problems that recur in

her pictures. Most immediately, such a characterization will allow us to attend

adequately and coherently to the rhetorics of presence and absence engendered by her

work; chapter three will consider this tension in her night sky and galaxy images, where

it is most pronounced. But more expansively, this interpretive framework will demand

that we contend with the basic insufficiency to which Celmins's supplement ostensibly

attends: that of the photograph. Where in the photograph is the "lack" that ultimately

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[34] Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (New York: JHU Press, 1998), 144.
[35] Ibid., 200.

portends the posterior arrival of Celmins's pencil? Is it in the interrupted continuum of time, of space? Further, the succeeding pages will consider the extent to which such a lack may be endemic to the act of representation, to the very constitution of the symbolic order.

CHAPTER 3: SPACE

Celmins's series of images featuring the night sky—a theme she adopts in the early 1970s and continues to explore through the 1990s—expounds upon the formal and thematic investigations established in her ocean surface pictures. Along with those earlier star-strewn explorations, images such as *Holding on to the Surface* (1983, fig. 4) betray a preoccupation with bounding the boundless, compressing the infinite, and re-describing the photograph. As we saw earlier in *Untitled (Ocean)*, *Holding on to the Surface* asserts an insistent planarity even as it alludes to a possibly unlimited depth. In both *Untitled (Ocean)* and *Holding on to the Surface*, the plane of representation appears to coincide with that of the support, the abiding presence of which beckons seductively from the margins of each. The respective figural units populating the graphite grounds—in the first instance, the individual waves; in the second, the distant stars—disperse evenly throughout each field, effecting an end-to-end treatment of the picture plane. Like the photographs from which they arise, both drawings remain utterly bereft of color, treating their subjects with a suppressed palette of black, white, and grey—the values dictated by the medium of graphite.[36] Of course, beyond mere formal kinship, the respective subjects of these pictures share a certain consonance as well;

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[36] Celmins implies that the elimination of color was an unconscious decision: "I didn't just wake up one day and say, I'm not going to use color. I slipped into it through drawing the photographs, which were black and white, because those were the only photographs available at the time." She goes on to admit the emotional effect of such an exclusion: "I do believe I wanted a more somber note and I thought that color was an extra, as if I were decorating something." Vija Celmins, qtd. in Celmins, Close, & Bartman, 16.

both depict an expansive vista of natural beauty that might safely be associated with the sublime.

Having sketched the affinity between Celmins's oceans and her skies, we are free to commence our own antlike crawl around the image at hand. Relatively modest in size, at 53.5 cm square, *Holding on to the Surface* nonetheless forcefully commands the studied attention of the observer. The precision and density of the graphite atop the acrylic ground openly invite a close physical proximity to its minutely considered layers.[37] Bearing extended inspection, the unyielding void of the black background eventually relaxes into a matte blackness of variegated tenor; this sign of flat absence gives way to a pulverous, fluctuating materiality. What seemed merely black upon first glance subsequently unfolds into minute fluctuation: the inky depth subdues to ashen grey, which in other passages assumes a dappled shimmer. The drawing thus compels the viewer's gaze to "hold on to the surface" in spite of its lively but subtle dynamism. Such finespun modulations heighten the inherent sense of drama as the eye encounters the complementary flicker of a star within this field. And those points of light, too, exhibit a playful and wondrous sense of variation; by turns oblong and circular, lucent and dusky, diffuse and discrete, the stars each announce themselves while always referring the eye on to the next, slightly variant iteration. Their seemingly endless variation also functions to refuse formal hierarchy within the plane of representation, privileging no particular figure over any other.

In such a structure, the night sky pictures bear an explicit formal link to the ocean surface images, which are likewise predicated on a dispersal of the viewer's gaze

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[37] Christopher Bedford, "Vija Celmins at the Hammer Museum," *Afterall Journal* (April 5, 2007), http://www.afterall.org/onlinearchive.html?online_id=18.

across the pictorial field. In chapter two, I read this operation as one that serves to flatten the image; it functions similarly here. Indeed, the title of *Holding on to the Surface* consolidates this association in literal terms: to hold is to make stationary, to prevent movement, to fix. When that action is applied to a planar surface, it restricts the expansion of that plane into three dimensions, ensuring its utter flatness. It should be noted, however, that where the ocean images merely *imply* a vast and possibly infinite depth beyond the visible surface of the water, pictures like *Holding on to the Surface* attempt to limn that depth directly, even as they articulate a formal flatness. That is, when asked "where is the depth in *Holding on to the Surface*?" the viewer can refer to specific passages in the image: "There," the viewer might respond, pointing to a particularly dark void between stars in the upper left of the picture. Compellingly, such areas of the image—those that most successfully communicate depth, void, *absence*—are those that contain the densest accumulation of graphite, the fullest measure of material *presence*.

It is this last characteristic of the night sky images that particularly motivates this chapter. The overriding, heavily worked materiality of *Holding on to the Surface*—like that of its myriad cousins—forces the viewer to reckon with its physical presence, to admit its stubbornly visceral pith. In this aspect, Celmins's work reveals its indebtedness to Abstract Expressionism, which famously reveled in its own brutish, masculinist materiality.[38] But quite unlike the happy accidents of Jackson Pollock's supposedly virile paintbrush, which held the promise of miraculously siring "an

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[38] Lisa Saltzman, "Reconsidering the Stain: On Gender, Identity, and New York School Painting," in *Reading Abstract Expressionism: Context and Critique*, ed. Ellen G. Landau (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005): 563.

unprecedented configuration of forms,"[39] Celmins's sensuous surface is no

happenstance event. "Long revered as an artist's artist,"[40] Celmins often spends

months or even years laboring over a single image, solitary in her studio.[41] The

resulting work bespeaks sustained and intensive study, dutiful attention, and the

repeated, almost obsessive application of medium to the support. Her professed goal in

such a method "is to make a fat, full form"—one that is not only materially present, but

corpulently so.[42] Elsewhere, she has further explained this process as "building a

dense and multileveled structure."[43] Such "dense, material-oriented images," according

to Celmins, reflect her desire to push representation "to the point where it gets full and

rich."[44] At first pass, we might read this impulse to "fill something until it is really full"[45] in

strictly formal terms: Celmins begins with a blank, empty support that she subsequently

seeks to augment with her medium.

But of course, the metaphorical implications of this approach beg our

consideration beyond terms merely formal. This idea of the pristine, virginal plain of the

canvas entreating the medium's corporeal fluidity reiterates a gendered conception of

artistic practice that peaked with Pollock's drips. But here again, Celmins inflects the

exhausted terms of Ab-Ex yet anew. In place of a pristine, fecund support, Celmins

implies utter emptiness; as I will argue, her untouched canvas, rather than proffering

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[39] William Chapin Seitz, *Abstract Expressionist Painting in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983): 98.
[40] Cynthia Navretta, "Review: Vija Celmins," *Women Artists News* 19 (Spring 1994): 24.
[41] Richard S. Field, *A Graphic Muse: Prints By Contemporary American Women* (Manchester, VT: Hudson Hills Press, 1987): 60.
[42] Qtd. in Jeanne Silverthorne, "Vija Celmins in Conversation with Jeanne Silverthorne," *Parkett* 44 (July 1995): 41.
[43] Celmins, Close, & Bartman, 18.
[44] Qtd. in Enright, 29.
[45] Celmins, Close, & Bartman, 18.

maiden fertility, remains obstinately and fundamentally barren. In her method, then, Celmins finds a foundational emptiness, an essential lack that she subsequently seeks to remedy—to "fill"— with the supplementary material presence of her pencil, her paint, her charcoal. To apprehend fully this gesture, we must attend to the absence it seeks to assuage. Where, this absence? Absent to whom? *Of what?*

Let us approach these questions by first considering the Photograph, which undergirds Celmins's images and which itself effects absence in several specific ways through its inherent structure and function. The first of these is the initial bodily absence of the implied viewer of the photograph: one takes a picture ostensibly in order to preserve a particular iteration of a visual field for a posterior, and therefore necessarily absent, viewer. At some later point in time, this viewer subsequently encounters the photograph and the calcified instant of time it professes to represent. Here we sustain the second, deferred absence endemic to the photograph's function: that of the photographer, whose body manipulated and caused the photographic process and yet remains arguably missing from its consequent effects. Once captured and inscribed, the photograph subsequently enters the visual realm, unmoored from the authority and intention of its photographer.

In these twinned bodily absences—in the first instance, that of the recipient-viewer; yet later, that of the sender-photographer—the photograph corresponds closely to other forms of representation that suppose a later viewer: painting, drawing, and writing most immediately come to mind here. For Jacques Derrida, writing serves as

the primary model of presence and absence to be found in representation.[46] He

positions written communication against the spoken word, where the former is thought

to be predicated on the absence of both the addressor and addressee, while the latter

seems to require the mutual physical presence of each. Ultimately, he argues, such a

distinction is moot, since all forms of representation are finally informed by absence.[47]

Further, for Derrida, the written sign is defined by its status as a physical remainder

which "is not exhausted in the present of its inscription, and which can give rise to an

iteration both in the absence of and beyond the presence of the empirically determined

subject who, in a given context, has emitted or produced it."[48] This "iterability" of the

written mark—its capacity for repetition in successive and separate contexts—dictates

that it will continue to function in the expressed (bodily) absence of the author's ability to

govern its reception and meaning. Of course, the photograph quite efficiently

demonstrates this last property: as Barthes has claimed, "what the Photograph

reproduces to infinity has occurred only once."[49] Whether in the form of the

photographic negative holding the promise of limitless reproduction, or more recently,

through the potential of the repeatedly transmitted digital pixel, the photograph has been

defined by its capacity for reiteration beyond the presence of its photographer. In fact,

the advent and rapid ascent in popularity of the medium have been understood as

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[46] Jacques Derrida, "Signature, Event, Context," trans. Alan Bass. Repr. in *Margins of Philosophy, Jacques Derrida* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 309-330.
[47] Op. cit. 317-318.
[48] Ibid.
[49] Barthes, 4.

reflective of a general cultural desire for industrial and mechanical forms of reproduction.[50]

But the absence engendered by the photographic take is not merely structured by its "iterability." The photograph indeed is especially equipped to communicate absence beyond the degree endemic to its analogues in other media (the written word, the penciled mark, the painted line). Here we look to the second part of Barthes' pronouncement: the subject of the photograph "has occurred only once," ossified in space and time at the close of the shutter. Always posthumous, structured by its inveterate posteriority, the photograph stands as an instantaneous relic. Yes, it bespeaks the reciprocal bodily absences of the photographer and the viewer, but more pointedly it signifies a time that is necessarily expired, a set of conditions that have irretrievably lapsed. It effects the absence of its subject even as it figures forth that subject's likeness; therein lies the "uncanny" effect of the photographic image.[51]

Celmins's choice of subjects emphasizes this paradigm of utter physical absence. The expansive seas and open night skies of the photographs explicitly exclude any pictorial reference to the presence of the human form. No wayward schooner mars her wavy ocean surface; the bodies populating her sky are celestial rather than human. Further, the disavowal of a perspectival system of depth might be read as a formal device that ignores the primacy of the viewer's fixed bodily position. By refusing to admit even the imagined presence of the human form, the photographs chosen by Celmins thematize the utter bodily lack inherent to their making. This is

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[50] Daniel Akiva Novak, *Realism, Photography, and Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 9.
[51] Sarah Kembler, "'The Shadow of the Object:' Photography and Realism," in *The Photography Reader*, ed. Liz Wells (New York: Routledge, 2003), 214.

perhaps nowhere more apparent than in images like *Holding on to the Surface*, which Celmins produced using NASA observatory photographs of space as the source.[52] Such photographs indicate a human desire to represent that which remains inaccessible to the human form, perhaps as a means of scientific, rational mastery over a limitless and infinite concept. But looking to the sky for answers, of course, is hardly a practice unique to space exploration in the 20th century. Since time immemorial, man has used the sky as a storehouse for his profoundest beliefs and ultimate fears: it serves as that all-encompassing image that can simultaneously stand for the possibility of divine presence and the emptiness of the utter void.

Celmins's reconsideration of these austere, empty photographs—these "transparent, weightless envelopes"—insists upon the reintroduction of the human touch and the vitality of material presence. Her rhythmic, persistent attempts to "fill" the images with real, palpable physicality reflect a certain anxiety about the very act of representation. By covering the paper with an acrylic "skin"[53], by allowing the fibrous weave of the paper to jut out at the margins, by depositing layer upon endless layer of graphite over the surface, Celmins attempts to remediate the fundamental lack (of physical, human form) inherent to the constitution of the image. The photograph presents the ideal target for this palliative gesture since, as Celmins herself has noted, it constitutes a "layer that creates distance."[54] In *Holding on to the Surface*, distance emerges both in the citation of the form of the photograph and in its subject: deep space, itself a sign of incalculable and intransigent remoteness. But in the arrival of her

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[52] Field 59.
[53] Celmins, qtd. in Relyea, 140.
[54] Celmins, Close, & Bartman, 16.

pencil to the acrylic-coated paper, Celmins seeks to bridge this gap: for her, "each time that point touches it is like bringing something from way down up to the surface. It is like being in touch with reality."[55] Like those before her who drew constellations in the sky as a way of making meaning in the void, Celmins makes mark after mark in the representational space in the service of filling that void. As the rub of the pencil deposits the physical evidence of its contact with the paper, Celmins attempts literally to close this space—to emphasize its utter and final two-dimensionality. Simultaneously, she seeks to span the physical spaces inherently created in the act of representation: between artist and viewer, sender and recipient.

"Reality," as communicated in these images, is all bound up in "touch," the physical contiguity of the human body to a second term. Here we must return to the stubborn hopefulness of that title: *Holding on to the Surface*, which operates in a continuous present tense of physical contact. But inevitably, that present tense must lapse into the past. There must come a point when the pencil no longer grazes the acrylic surface, when the image ceases becoming and begins merely to be. At this juncture, Celmins's devoted, remedial gesture is uncovered as utterly complicit with that which it seeks to fix: in seeking to mitigate the unrepentant separation produced by the photograph, she ultimately reproduces its effects. The final chapter will assess the extent to which such a separation may be thematized in Celmins's exploration of the image of the spiderweb.

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[55] Celmins, qtd. in Larsen, 39.

Figure 4
Vija Celmins
Holding on to the Surface, 1983
graphite on acrylic ground on paper, 50.5 x 50.5 cm
private collection

CHAPTER 4: WEB

At once fragile and robust, particular and general, otherworldly and mundane, the subject of Celmins's *Web #1* (1998, fig. 5) inspires a network of competing associations. This potential for multiplicity makes the subject ripe for Celmins's signature serial exploration, which she first applies to the theme of the spiderweb in the 1990s and continues to the present day. The metaphorical terrain of the spiderweb—rife with allusions to nature, mythology, artmaking, formal structure—seems too rich to be arbitrary, but in fact Celmins professes a complete disinterest in such associations. In reference to the spiderweb imagery, Celmins has claimed that "the image is just a structure I don't have to think about, like Jasper Johns's flag." [56] In pointing to Johns, Celmins reveals her desire to cast the image, rather reductively, as an armature over which she deposits her multiple layers of charcoal.[57] But even if we grant Celmins the premise of her own thoughtlessness—a charitable gesture on our part—we, the viewers, are offered no such option. The kind of looking precipitated by *Web #1*, like that of *Holding on to the Surface* or even *Untitled (Ocean)*, is one of extended duration

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[56] Qtd. in Silverthorne, 41.

[57] Simultaneously, she indicates the artistic patrimony to which her method owes a great deal. Johns's approach to making pictures—with its innovative use of popular media, its deep skepticism of the claims of Ab-Ex, its investigation of the material stuff of art— paved the way for Celmins's iteration on these same themes. For more on the relationship of Johns to Celmins, see Relyea, 64-67; Diana Burgess-Fuller, *Art/Women/California 1950-2000: Parallels and Intersections* (Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002): 221-222; and Richard Shiff, "Realism of Low Resolution: digitization and modern painting," in Terry E. Smith, ed., *Impossible Presence: Surface and Screen in the Photogenic Era* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001): 149-156.

and close physical proximity, inviting prolonged reflection. Christopher Bedford has characterized these drawings' relationship to the human form as "magnetic," enticing a "progressively closer encounter" with the drawings themselves.[58] But magnets repel as forcefully as they attract: just as the human body is seduced by the sultry physicality of the drawing, the aggressive frontality of the representational space therein explicitly pushes back against the entrance of the human form (a disallowance more fully explored in chapter three). Refused admission into the image, the viewer *must consider it* as a second, separate term that is distinct from, but dependent on, his own presence. In short, for the viewer, *Web #1* is a structure he must indeed "think about," considering both its highly articulated form and its potential for content.

This structure is organized by the spiderweb itself, which—like Celmins's oceans and skies—appears to remain mostly coincident with the picture plane. But rather unlike those previous images, the subject of *Web #1* does not run end-to-end over the plane of representation. The slender filaments of the web affix at several points around the margins, stretching the web's expanse between their seemingly random positions. The lines connecting these fibers to the picture's periphery, which are in fact erased from the buildup of layers of charcoal, converge at the center of the drawing. Smaller segments run between these overriding orthogonals, creating an oblong gridded network of exposed paper. This structure necessarily abdicates large swaths of the visual field to negative space: a broad wedge of darkness at the upper left, a smaller one directly below, two bulging half-ellipses at the bottom right. A highly articulated figure-ground relationship results from this spatial organization, in which a single (albeit

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[58] Bedford, 1.

structurally complex) centrally-focused form emerges against a monolithic ground. This presents a further point of departure from Celmins's prior body of work: her previous images of expansive bounded surfaces, as we have seen, are predicated on the dispersal of the viewer's gaze across the representational field, rather than the directed focus towards the image's center. Or perhaps, more cyclically, *Web #1* may represent less of a personal innovation than a methodical return to the idiom of the centrally-positioned single objects that populated her early career, such as *Plane*.

The rigidly pronounced geometry of *Web #1* unavoidably conjures the specters of two dominant—and supposedly oppositional—formal organizing principles of the Western pictorial tradition: perspective and the grid. The multiple orthogonal lines radiating from a centrally positioned single point certainly seem to allude to the system of one-point perspective, which purports to communicate the recession of three-dimensional space on a two-dimensional plane using a single vanishing point. Simultaneously, the various lines and their regularized intersections together comprise a sort of lopsided gridlike structure, apportioning the representational space into discrete, flattened units. Neither analogy is completely satisfying: in one-point perspective, the lines intersecting the orthogonals should be parallel to the horizon line. Likewise, in an ideal grid, all lines must remain either parallel or perpendicular so that none of them converge. In *Web #1*, both of these conditions fail, so that neither system gains primacy over the other, while the ghost of each nevertheless stubbornly persists.

The simultaneous presence of both perspective and the grid in *Web #1* figures forth a singular tension that underwrites the bulk of Celmins's career: that between illusory depth and material surface. As Rosalind Krauss has noted, the Western system

of perspective constituted "the demonstration of the way reality and its representation could be mapped onto one another."[59] As such, the perspectival system stands for the ability of the image to serve adequately as proxy for its referent in the three-dimensional world. By contrast, the grid, as Krauss goes on to explain, radically ruptures this system by initiating a transfer in which "nothing changes place." In its insistence on flatness and its own autonomy, the grid plainly does *not* seek to map three-dimensional space onto a two-dimensional plane. It corresponds, point by point, to nothing but itself. In so doing, the grid emphasizes the utter fact and inveterate facture of the material image. The physical stuff of the image, when organized by the grid, refuses to coalesce as a representation of some other, second term; the grid blocks the constitution of the symbolic order by insisting that the image stands for only itself.

In her choices of subject and composition in *Web #1*, Celmins embeds both perspective and grid within the image of a natural form, while simultaneously rendering them equally incomplete. This gesture robs each system of its respective claims of objective, rational authority. Indeed, while the perspectival system and the grid have been understood as functionally divergent modes of operation (see above), both similarly insist on the triumph of the rational mind over the space and operation of the picture plane. Perspective, with its roots in Renaissance values of humanism, has long been accorded value based on its ability to order and systematize the plurality of the visual world.[60] Likewise, the use of the grid as a device for the translation of three-dimensional form to two-dimensional plane boasts a long history dating back to ancient

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[59] Rosalind Krauss, "Grids," *October* 9 (Summer 1979), 52.
[60] The canonical source for this idea still remains Erwin Panofsky, *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, trans. C.S. Wood (New York: Zone Books, 1991).

Egypt.[61] More recently, of course, artists such as Sol LeWitt have deployed the grid in such a manner as to "dematerialize" the art object, supposedly effecting the ultimate victory of the rational mind over base materiality.[62] Celmins's citation of these structures within the context of her manifestly physical drawing calls into question the viability of a truly de-materialized art. Further, Celmins's investigation of the rational objectivity supposed by such systems resonates with her parallel interrogation of the photograph and its similar associations (explored here in chapters two and three). Just as her work seeks to mitigate with material presence the mechanically objective separation enacted by the photograph, so too does it appear to undermine the supposedly rational (read: non-material) structures that undergird art in the West.

While Celmins's overt engagement with perspective and the grid culminates in the late series of pictures to which *Web #1* belongs, her latent interest in addressing these formal structures manifests as a connective thread uniting the themes that span her career. Consider, for instance, the much earlier *Untitled (Ocean with Cross #1)* (1971, fig. 6), which depicts the radical expanse of an ocean surface as represented in a black-and-white photograph. In this aspect, it is hardly distinguishable from her *Untitled (Ocean)* of just three years before. But even as the viewer's eye traverses the familiarly irregular crests and troughs, it is caught by a minute absence: two finely articulated, almost imperceptible lines, literally erased from the buildup of graphite that

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[61] James W. Davis, "Unified Drawing Through the Use of Hybrid Pictorial Elements and Grids," *Leonardo* 5 (Winter, 1972): 7.
[62] Lucy R. Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997): 5.

forms the waves.[63] These two lines span the image from corner to corner, forming a

diagonally-oriented cross which intersects at the exact center of the drawing. And what

are those lines, really, if not the dominant orthogonal lines in a perspective drawing?

These lines structure the image so as to stage a showdown between presence and

threatening absence. The image remains unequivocally and physically present, in all of

its layered graphite-on-acrylic-on-paper materiality, and yet seems on the verge of utter

negation, falling out of existence altogether under the nullification of that X. Indeed,

some of its well-worked materiality is lost already to the ominous rub of the eraser.

Much as *Plane* earlier threatened to flutter away and out of our realm of perception, so

too does *Untitled (Ocean with Cross #1)* tenuously toe the boundary between material

presence and threatening absence under the organizational structure of perspective.

An early instance of the grid in Celmins's oeuvre operates in much the same

way. In a mezzotint entitled *Strata* (1984, fig. 7), the artist uses a general treatment and

format evidenced in her other night sky images, such as *Holding on to the Surface.* The

image flattens the deep space of the night sky through the conceit of the photograph, its

field littered at random with the punctuation of glittering stars. But where *Holding on to*

the Surface maintains the continuity of its plane of representation all the way until the

margins, Celmins chooses to divide *Strata*'s field into a 10 x 10 grid using the periodic

interruption of delicate but strictly regimented lines. This strategy metes out the terrain

into 100 distinct flattened modules, each iteration like a scaled version of the picture as

a whole. Like the erased orthogonal lines of *Untitled (Ocean with Cross #1)*, *Strata*'s

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[63] Erasure as a representational strategy, of course, occupies an intriguing territory of its own in the larger canon of Western art since World War II. The salience of this history as it applies to Celmins's work is not lost on the author; rather, this represents a critical point for future expansion and refinement of this text.

intersecting lines are utterly devoid of the material presence of the medium: they mark

the points at which no ink was deposited onto the paper from its contact with the plate.

In fact, the physical production of such lines in the studio process might be fruitfully

likened to the gesture of erasure evident in *Untitled (Ocean with Cross #1)*. In the dark-

to-light method of mezzotint, the whole face of the plate is roughened evenly using

either a manual or mechanical rocker. The artist then figures forth the image by

selectively burnishing parts of this "ground" with metal tools, flattening the pits caused

by the rocking process. The most flattened areas of the image hold no ink in the

printing process, resulting in the utter absence of the medium in the final print. Thus,

the inscription of *Strata*'s gridded lines is the physical result of Celmins's gesture of

negation, in much the same vein as the obliterative X in *Untitled (Ocean with Cross #1)*

was the result of literal erasure.

      In *Web #1*, the superimposition of these two structural forms—the grid and the

orthogonal line—aligns their respective functions as pervasive organizational systems.

Further, Celmins's usage of erasure to inscribe both of these forms in the image can be

seen to thematize their mutual investment in the primacy of the rational human mind

over the stuff and substance of material objects. The literal removal of physical medium

from the support effectively symbolizes this triumph. But of course, Celmins can hardly

be understood as complicit in such an exercise: everywhere in this text, we have

attended to her images and their requisite physical fullness, in all their loving and

material vitality. Her working investment in these virtues is the cornerstone of her

practice; as she herself has claimed, "My idea of painting a single image over and over

on the same canvas is not really what I would call a 'brilliant' idea. It is an act of trying

to reach some physical presence beyond 'idea.'"[64] In these images, these myriad

isolated islands of physical being, Celmins roundly impeaches the traditional Western

investment in the rational idea abstracted from material presence. In her method,

insisting at every turn on the immediacy and necessity of physical form, she interrogates

the authority of the structures in visual culture that have come to codify this allegedly

objective, rational order—photography, perspective, the grid—even as she seeks to

mitigate the utter absence effected in their respective operations.

Celmins's serially devoted attention to the making and remaking of material form

calls our attention, finally, to the thematic content of *Web #1*. Perhaps unavoidably, her

meticulous method aligns her with the (also provocatively absent) architect of the image

within the photograph: the spider. But the structure also calls to mind the mythological

figure of Penelope, the weaver and faithful wife of Odysseus, who in his absence

feigned weaving a burial shroud for his elderly father Laertes. This she did in the

service of staving off the daily pressure of increasingly aggressive circling suitors ready

to pounce. At the end of every day over the course of Odysseus's three-year sojourn,

Penelope unraveled the work she had accomplished on this shroud to delay the

demand to marry, which event would finalize and solidify her beloved's absence. Like

Penelope seeking to assuage the utter finality of the ultimate absence in death, Celmins

likewise makes and unmakes, draws and erases, desiring but ultimately failing to

palliate the ultimate absence inherent to the act of representation.

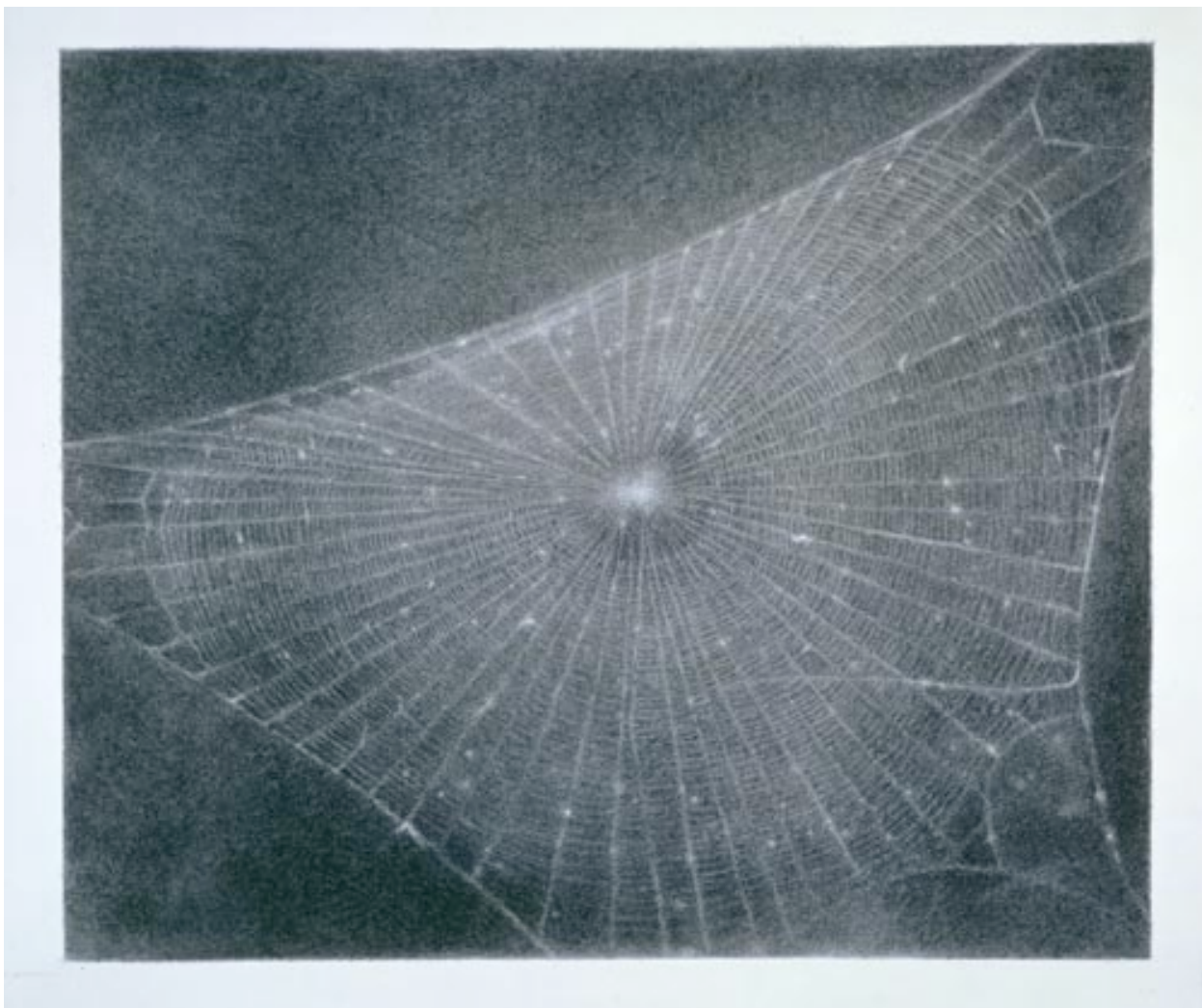---

[64] Qtd. in Silverthorne, 40.

Figure 5
Vija Celmins
Web #1, 1998
charcoal on paper, 57 x 65 cm
London, Collection Anthony d'Offay

Figure 6
Vija Celmins
Untitled (Ocean with Cross #1), 1971
graphite on acrylic ground on paper, 36 x 48 cm
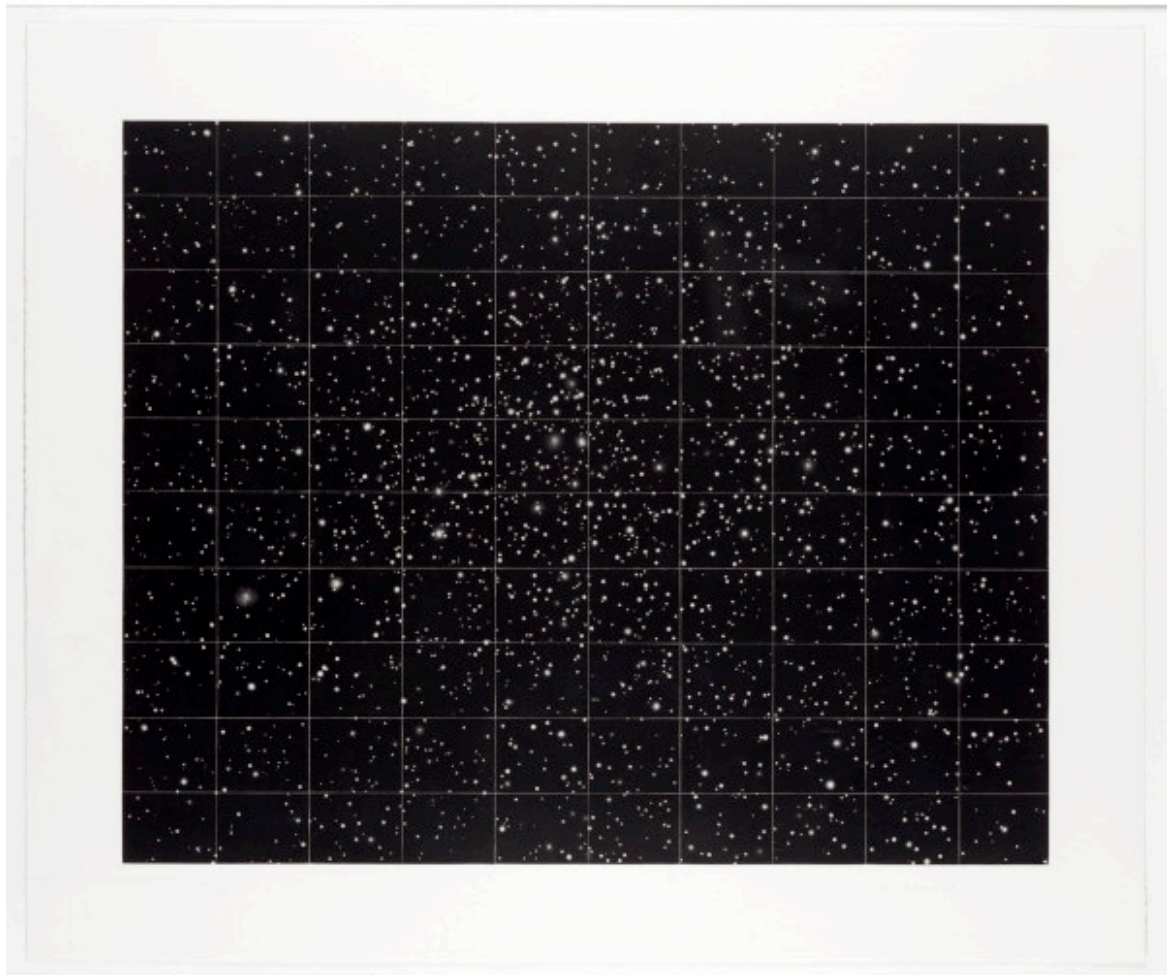New York, Museum of Modern Art

Figure 7
Vija Celmins
Strata, 1983
mezzotint, 75 x 90 cm
New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art

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