Florian Dombois (*1966, Berlin) is an artist who has focused on time, models, landforms, labilities, wind and tectonic activity. He has been a professor at Zurich University of the Arts, Switzerland since 2011. In 2010, he received the German Sound Art Prize.

Julie Harboe is an art historian, critic and curator. Among other tasks she co-founded and managed an art space, developed and coordinated a unit for artistic research and is currently a lecturer at Future Laboratory CreaLab and Lucerne School of Business. She focuses on transdisciplinary collaborations in research, education, business and art.
A reordering and re-envisioning of the photographic

There is no single site of the photograph. [...] There is a distributive unity to the photograph itself.

Peter Osborne, Anywhere or Not at All

A reordering and re-envisioning of the photographic

This essay sets out to explore three terms that are important to photography, namely scale, horizon and imaginative variation. The relationships between these will be explored with an emphasis on questions of scale, not only because it is the least familiar in the photographic context, but also because it links and gives shape to what the others might mean for photography.

We use photography to establish horizons of meaning that might help to orient us visually within a complex world. But its promise to perform this function, to render the world proportionate, is often duplicitous. One might go as far to say that precisely insofar as it holds out such imaginative possibilities, photography also serves as an agent of disorientation and disproportion. In general, the term photography might be thought of as naming the set of horizons thus promised and the processes through which they are created, used, contested and dissolved. In this light, photography appears as a massively determined and complex form of social imagination: a complex process of imaginative variation on the world.

Since its inception, photography has come to inform and to transform the spatial and temporal, epistemological and phenomenological horizons of experience associated with almost all spheres of life, and has done so in many and various ways. It has long since served, for instance, as an important vehicle of practical and imaginative possibilities taken up by individuals. And it endures as a major instrument through which the prospects offered by political, cultural and economic institutions are given shape. One can link these functions of photography to recent critical debates and ask whether, perhaps, we have 'lost' the horizons of meaning and value that might have oriented us in the past and now need to turn to image forms that could help us construct new horizons. Or, alternatively, one might ask whether the expectation that new social forms might constitute themselves through the image's projection of novel horizons is fatefuly circumscribed by a broader and overdetermining "horizon of endless accumulation [...] politically coded in economic terms as the freedom of ever greater consumption", as Peter Osborne (2011: 127) has it.

This essay adopts a metacritical approach to these questions and possibilities. It sets out to think of photography as a form that promises and withholds, constitutes and dissolves the very possibility of establishing horizons of meaning and value. Hence, the essay's remit is to work towards understanding the relationship between the imagination (figured as a technology of imaginative variation) and the horizons of meaning and value associated with it (through a kind of diastolic/systolic rhythm of promise and dissolution). In photography, I argue, a key mechanism of these operations and relations is scale.

One might take a step to one side here and note that issues of scale are integral to photography and have been since its earliest days. Though much writing on photography and many different spheres of photographic practice entail significant questions and facts of scale, surprisingly little sustained and explicit critical or theoretical attention has been paid to this fact.

In response, this essay sets out to explore the senses of scale encountered in, disclosed by and established through the photographic. In fact, it sets out to reorient the way in which photography is understood according to these relationships. Scale and horizon are explored here as closely related and vital aspects of the photographic and as two facets of a matrix of processes and possibilities that shape what photography might mean and what it might do in the present, that is, the horizons of meaning it both proffers and serves to destruct and the form photography takes as an imaginative variation on the world.
Photographic operations of and at scale and the manner in which these might hold out or threaten to dissolve horizons of photographic meaning and value appear ever more obvious in, and indeed vital to, the contemporary context. On the one hand, photography continues to hold out the historically familiar promise that it might enable some kind of meaningful orientation within and towards a complex and disorientating world. For a discussion of related issues in which the terms horizon and orientation are central, see Ahmed 2006. On the other hand, the contemporary form of the photographic – its computational and networked character and the uses this enables – undermines the possibility of establishing and maintaining meaningful horizons of experience. Photography continues to promise that the world might be set to measure and that events unfolding within it might be rendered proportionate. (For a resonant discussion of proportionality and disproportionality as they shape our political present, see Weizman 2012: 1–27.) In the very act of providing them, it seems, the photographic also produces conditions of disorientation and literal experiences of de-rangement that threaten to dissolve what might give epistemological and phenomenological horizons coherence, stability and efficacy. These issues and this terminology shape a range of recent writings on the contemporary image, from the vertiginous dissolution of pictorial perspective and the horizons it may once have offered in Hito Steyerl’s writings on networked digital culture (Steyerl 2012) to the Former West curatorial project and its critical concern for contemporary horizons of social expectation and political possibility (for contrasting views on these questions, see the contributions to this project by Sheikh 2011 and Osborne 2011). In relation to scale and by way of further contextualization, one might also remark Timothy Clark’s account of the derangements of scale associated with impending environmental disaster and the gap between individual agency and global processes this entails (Clark 2009). And finally, one might link these questions to the generalized techno-scientific crisis of “disorientation as such” diagnosed by Bernard Stiegler in his Technics and Time (Stiegler 2009: 3).

However, the question remains: why would all of this encourage one to think or try to rethink photography in terms of scale? And, for that matter, what senses are the terms scale and photography being given here? A convincing answer to these questions, I argue, only emerges when one takes seriously the marked variation in meaning that these terms take on in relation to one another.

The quotation from Peter Osborne used as an epigram above might give a clue to what is at stake here. In the face of its recent technical-historical transformation, Osborne characterises the contemporary photograph – an object whose antecedents are often fetishized as the basic ‘unit’ of photography – as a distributed unity. The photograph’s conventionally statically conceived and objectively bounded unity is now dispersed, pluralized and rendered processual. Its material existence as an image-object is no longer guaranteed by the limit of a singular and discrete object, if ever it was. Whilst the photograph nonetheless persists as a familiar site around which social investments, cultural identifications, means of knowing and modes of sensible association might cohere, the conditions that underpin these possibilities are radically altered and destabilized. This viewpoint considerably complicates the material forms and modes of space and time commonly associated with the photograph and, by implication, throws into question how these inform the experiences, uses and meanings that a photograph could be expected to enable.

The notion of the photograph as a distributive unity would seem to place great emphasis on what can count as a whole or as a part in this set of photographic relations. Because of this, whilst Osborne’s problematization of the photograph as a unitary object rings true, one might still be left asking (at risk of being reductive) exactly what parts of the photograph, what features of the photographic apparatus and what specific functions of their material distribution are complicated, displaced and set in motion.

What is projected here is a situation characterized by a fundamental reordering and re-envisioning of relationships between, on the one hand, the operations and functions inherent to photographic images and apparatuses and, on the other hand, the horizons of meaning, use and value that these might be expected to establish and sustain. One might begin to make sense of the photograph as a distributive unity by noting that, as a conceptual figure, distributed unity foregrounds the relationship between dispersed material and technical moments of the photograph whilst also articulating the scope and reach of its possible uses. Considering the photograph as a generalized site of distributive unity raises questions concerning the intertwined material, cultural, technical and geopolitical horizons that photographs and their uses, meanings and imaginative possibilities might entail, project and operate within. Starting out from an analysis of variations in the meaning of scale in the photographic context enables one to elucidate the workings of such horizons and the importance of this for
an understanding of the contemporary situation of photography. This also entails beginning at least to rethink what the photographic is as a form of imagination.

**Scale and the photographic**

So, what does the term scale already mean in and for photography? Many already specified notions of scale are familiar in this context, though they remain under-examined as such. Notable amongst these is the often remarked fact that photographic images achieve their strong reality effects whilst radically de- and rescaling what they depict (see, for instance, Kracauer 1960: 4–5, Benjamin 1972: 202–203, Barthes 1981: 12–13, Sonntag 1979: 4, Därmann 1995: 268–274, Wells 2013: 119–160). The techniques through which these sliding scales of actualization operate also open up photographs to other kinds of scaled variation, like the changing modes of reproduction inscribing them in large-scale processes of mass production, dissemination and consumption. Remarking on this is another staple gesture of writing about photography (see Benjamin 1969: 217–252, Busch 1989: 126–154, Flusser 2000: 65–75 and 2013: 75–82, Virilio 1994, Nancy 2005: 106–107). Moreover, the fact that photographs are taken to be representations in the first place derives from variable and associated technical processes organized into an apparatus that is oriented to set the appearance of things in scaled relation to one another, such as through the camera control of focus, exposure and aperture (cf. Flusser 2013: 195–201). Spatial and temporal relationships between things are registered through a predetermined combination of scaling operations that offer and circumscribe a range of possibilities according to which orders and ratios of scale — for instance, relative size and position, surface area and overlap, acuity and blur — are established in the making of a photographic image. These explicit scaling operations condition photographic images and afford their representational effects (Maynard 2008: 187–209). They are also, however, determined as conditions by the various bodies of technical knowledge and commercial interest governing the industries that produce photographic apparatuses and the technologized image cultures these facilitate and seek to exploit (cf. Flusser 2000, Osborne 2013: 117–131, Stiegler 2009: 118–122, Cunningham 2012).

1 The projection of scale as an issue for photography in this section draws closely on my discussions of this theme elsewhere (see Fisher 2013 and 2016).
the measure of something (Flusser 2013: 91–98, Fisher 2016). Practices and protocols of photomemosure thus stand as second-order modes of abstraction and calculation that rest on strategies for disambiguating photography’s propensity for setting things to scale. That various modes of specialized measurement (explicit modes of scaling) can be achieved by using photographic means derives as a possibility from those modes of scale, scaling and scalability that are harboured in the photographic as such. Attention to specific practices of scaling that use photography foregrounds the ways in which they exploit this fundamental characteristic of photography. Starting out from the delimited technical senses that the term scale has already accrued in photographic practice leads one back to a more general and ambiguous sense of the scalar character of the photographic as such. (Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s ‘working note’ of 1960 on the ontological significance of the notion of scale in The Visible and the Invisible provides a very suggestive guide to thinking about this. See Merleau-Ponty 1968: 226–227.)

Together, these different starting points – and the ways in which they complicate the meaning of scale in the photographic context – combine to suggest a further response to the problems projected and questions asked at the outset. An intuition guides the answer: that consideration paid to the status of variations on the meaning of scale and the relationships pertaining between these actually matters very much to our understanding of the photographic. And a way of articulating where this might lead has already been implied. The diverse, discrete and concrete levels at which the term scale already applies to photography suggest that they are interlinked and ultimately codependent. This indicates, I argue, that a variegated operation of differing but coincident senses of scale, modes of scaling, scaled phenomena and conditions of scalability is a constant in and for the photographic. The variation in and, crucially, the play between these photographic senses of scale – and not any one particular fact, phenomenon, technique, order or discourse of scale alone – is what needs to be imagined and held in view in order that it might be conceptualized and evaluated.

(For a parallel conception of scale articulated in terms of historiography, see Ricoeur 2004: 209–216.) How might one approach this task?

**Imaginative variation: discovering the principle of a variation in photographic scales**

This essay is encouraging you to entertain the notion that an inherently variegated combination of senses, operations and phenomena of scale is a ubiquitous and necessary feature of all photographies and that this fact is significant. In support of these claims I would like to propose a thought experiment.

Try, for a moment, to think about photography without referring to the easily accepted authority of the idea that it is, at root, a medium of representational images; without privileging one or other favoured artistic, personal or scientific use of photographs; and without taking for granted familiar critical tropes such as photography’s widespread institutionalization as a vehicle of identification and encounter with others.

Suspend your interest in all of this for a while and, bearing in mind its multifaceted and hybrid character, allow your imagination to zoom in and out whilst ranging as freely as possible over different aspects of the photographic, including anything that might suggest itself as a variation on it. If, in doing this, what occurs to you retains a sense of belonging under the heading of the photographic, dwell on it for a while to see what, if anything, is distinctive about this. The photographic will no doubt prove an expansive, multilayered and capricious category and if you approach this task honestly the horizons of its imaginative variation will appear effectively infinite. The promiscuity with which unexpected connections between otherwise distinct aspects of photography might arise will make the object of your reflection bewildering in its complexity. But don’t short-circuit the experiment because of this. For now, you are just being asked to put to one side any determinate concern for customary ways of understanding and experiencing photography so as to consider what might emerge in their place, allowing other connections to suggest themselves and keeping an eye on how one thing leads to another in the process so that, later on, you can evaluate the significance of what occurred to you, recall what seemed to link these things together and assess whether this emergent connectedness might turn out to be important.

Some readers will no doubt recognize that this thought experiment draws on aspects of Edmund Husserl’s methodological procedure of “phenomenological reduction”. In fact, the experiment isolates one key conceptual strategy of this reduction, namely, “imaginative variation” (Husserl 1983: 131–141; see also Renaud Barbaras’s critical refiguration of the Husserlian reduction, Barbaras 2006: 44–80). But, having noted this connection – perhaps also whilst flagging up the eccentric focus, scope and orientation it is given here – further consideration of this reference to Husserl can be set to one side, at least for the purposes of this essay, as it is the operation.
of the strategy of imaginative variation and the implications of this opera-
tion that are of direct concern here (see Fisher 2009). The thought exper-
iment you have just been encouraged to take part in adumbrates the form
taken by photography insofar as it operates as an imaginative variation
on the world.

At risk of stating the obvious, a first thing to note is that, depending
on who performs it and from which starting point, this reflective procedure
will always produce different articulations of the photographic. Insofar as
it presupposes an open community of performers, of necessity, this strategy
traces multiple pathways through the territory of the photographic and
the vast range of things upon which it touches. Nevertheless, I argue, that in
their very difference, these multiple possible trajectories share a charac-
teristic: they bind together diverse aspects of the photographic as possibil-
ities and do so in a process that is effectively unending. And this helps in
attempting to conceptualize the hybrid, changeable and complex character
of the photographic.

This exercise of imaginative variation exceeds its initial function
as a heuristic device that encourages one to reflect anew on the photog-
raphic. The effectively infinite and differentiated horizon of imaginative
variability that emerges through this is, I argue, actually an important
general characteristic of the photographic. The effectively infinite exten-
sion and the necessarily plural and differentiated status of its imagina-
tive variations establishes an interesting relation to the massively deter-
mined and highly complex horizon of words and things, processes and
forms that stand as diverse but integral aspects of the photographic. And
this enables one to conceive of the photographic in its complex outlines
as a realm of imaginative possibilities. However difficult the photographic
might be to encompass in thought or to grasp practically, one only ever
encounters or is able to conceive of it through particular instances, objects,
practices, conventions and forms such as those outlined above (inclu-
ding those that were put to one side at the outset of the thought experiment).
The methodological strategy of imaginative variation suggests a way of
holding in view a sense of photography as itself a kind of imaginative va-
ration. But what does this mean and what has it to do with the analysis
of photography and scale?

Another important feature to emerge from this process of willed,
free-ranging and imaginative variation is the importance of scale for pho-
ography. Abstracting from the conventionalized attitudes according to

which photographs are often thought reveals that some admixture of various
photographic senses of scale is always present, whichever pathway through
the photographic may be taken. Start out on the experiment again. This
time limit yourself to imaginatively varying the ways in which a range of dif-
f erent and modulating senses of scale — some of which were sketched
above — feature in whatever aspect, form or moment of photography that
comes into consideration. Though the senses of scale, scaling and scala-
bility that emerge will obviously differ, some combination of scalar factors
will always be identifiable. Out of this process an expanded notion of
the photographic meaning of scale emerges as nothing less than one of
photography's irreducible elements.

Because of the wide variation in its photographic senses, scale is an
intuitable feature of all the possible photographies that might be imag-
ined in this way. The conceptual gambit pursued in this essay is to take this
imaginatively emergent ubiquity a step further. Without having to add
anything to the connections that emerge in this way, one can conceptually
generalize the persistent occurrence of such meanings and operations
of scale as a necessary feature, namely, as the principle of a variation in the
scales of the photographic and the significance of the play between these.

This principle can be given an adjectively inflected noun form.
It is an *ineluctable variegation* — an unavoidable characteristic of diversifi-
cation — that gives overall shape to the meaning of scale in the context
of photography and that takes the form of a semantic and praxial 'unity in
diversification' of the many senses and uses of scale harboured within
the photographic. Arrays of photographic equipment, the photographic im-
ages that result from them and the practices out of which these emerge,
coalesce as orchestrations of different modalities of scale. Though always
contingent, some such variegated orchestration of scales is also always
at work in all possible photographies. To make, to use, to mediate and to
encounter a photographic image is to be inscribed within a play between
variegated phenomena, operations and facts of scale.

This expanded and variable notion of scale, I argue, describes the
concrete form photography takes on in its function as a massively deter-
mined imaginative variation of the world. As such, it also suggests itself as
a key mechanism through which horizons of meaning and value might
be instituted or destabilized and how these processes might be critically
thought.
Photographic Horizons

One might start out again on yet another tack by asking what the term horizon means in and for photography. The answers parallel the operations of scale and the form of imaginative variation articulated above. Amongst its many possible meanings for photography, horizon most obviously denotes the division of pictorial space that promises a perspective on what might be depicted in a photograph. Such pictorial organization entails the preparation of frames for perceptual attention so that one might become absorbed in an image or set it to one side in favour of something else. And this foregrounds the phenomenological sense of horizon as a process in which an object of attention stands out against its surrounding environment and in which one’s concern for the former sets the concerns of the latter in abeyance for a time. In a vernacular vein, photographs serve conventionally to orient the production of social meaning and to provide nodal points around which a range of personal values and experiences might cohere (Ahmed 2006: 89–90). As Ahmed remarks, far from being neutral and unmotivated, such horizons take shape according to dominant expectations informing what orientations might be affirmed, for instance, as they are inscribed with sexual, gendered and raced values. The orienting function of horizons acts normatively to affirm or to denigrate those who find themselves positioned within them. In the photographic context, the meaning of the term horizon cannot be constrained by pictorial concerns or by the valorization of immediate experience, though it structures the former and gives tenor to the latter. Here, what is on the verge of the discrete photographic image acts as an unstable horizon. What is going on at these verges, one should note, is swept up into the tension between the photograph as a discrete site of concern and its status as a distributed unity. Photographically, experiences are spatialized and temporalized in complex and disjunctive ways, establishing what one might call interruptive horizons that layer the immediate physical environment with distant things and past events, that collocate experience of the here and now with otherwise invisible, antecedent or anticipated phenomena, and that do so in ways that exceed purely visual processes. Thus, the term horizon suggests a machinic parallel to the situated limits of human vision as well as, crucially, signifying a range of prosthetic photographic capacities that promise to overcome these limits. The phenomenological senses of horizon, then, appear to be interlaced through photography with other technical and historical, temporal and spatial, social and political senses that the term also assumes. It likewise refers one to those modes of bodily and machinic comportment entailed in acts of photographing and being photographed and it sets these horizons in the expansive scope and reach of the photographic as a suite of cultural and historical processes.

This brief rehearsal of some possible photographic meanings of the term horizon parallels the description of photography’s ineluctably variegated scales made earlier in the essay. The analogy between them is by no means accidental or merely rhetorical. The photographic senses of horizon are inherently scaled. The scaled character of the photographic is tied up with its articulation of horizons.

Returning to and expanding upon a point made earlier might help in making sense of what connects these layered determinations of the term horizon to the notion of scale developed above. A basic function of photographic apparatuses is to register the ostensible spatial and temporal state of things, to fix these together at certain scales of relation and according to a combination of prefigured operations of scale and anticipations of scaled outcomes. One implication of thinking about the photographic in this way is that one never encounters ‘space’ or ‘time’ — nor, for that matter, any place, thing, moment or event — other than through a combination of processes that entail the possibility of setting salient aspects of appearance to scale in the more or less enduring but also changeable form of an image. If to scale in this sense is a basic function of photography — the interior horizon of the photograph as image — photographs and photographic apparatuses of all kinds are also, as a matter of principle, subject to the demands of what I earlier called exterior horizons that entail their being scaled, de- and re-scaled, thus making scalability a fundamental feature of the photographic.

Whilst the relationship between such interior and exterior horizons may appear relatively fixed from any one vantage point, they are never entirely static, nor are they ever totally distinct. One might think of them as vectors of scaled and scaling relation, as operations that fill out what ‘distribution’ might mean as a condition of the contemporary photograph and as a way of thinking these technical or apparatchick conditions as intimately intertwined with broader processes. In this vein, for instance, one can note that photographically mediated desires and the photographic potential for setting things to measure or proportion, useful bodies of photographic knowledge and moments of affective immediacy in the face of photographs all share the characteristic of arising out of and being enabled by a play between scaled relations that set the terms for any horizon of possibility, meaning and value they may promise.
By way of a brief conclusion, one can remark that questions asked about the meaning of scale in and for photography are, it turns out, questions asked about the horizons held out by photographs, the promises these entail and also often disappoint. Articulation of these relationships fills out the distributive unity of the contemporary photograph and renders it thinkable as a play between scales; a series of modulations in the ineluctable variegation of scale that cast and recast themselves in and as our photographic horizons. It is in this sense that scale and horizon promise to help one understand the problematic of photography as a form of imaginative variation on the world.

References


