





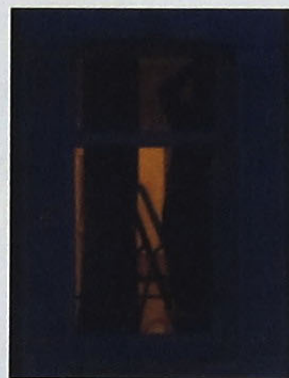
Mental space

How my neighbours became buildings - Sarah van Sonsbeeck, 2010



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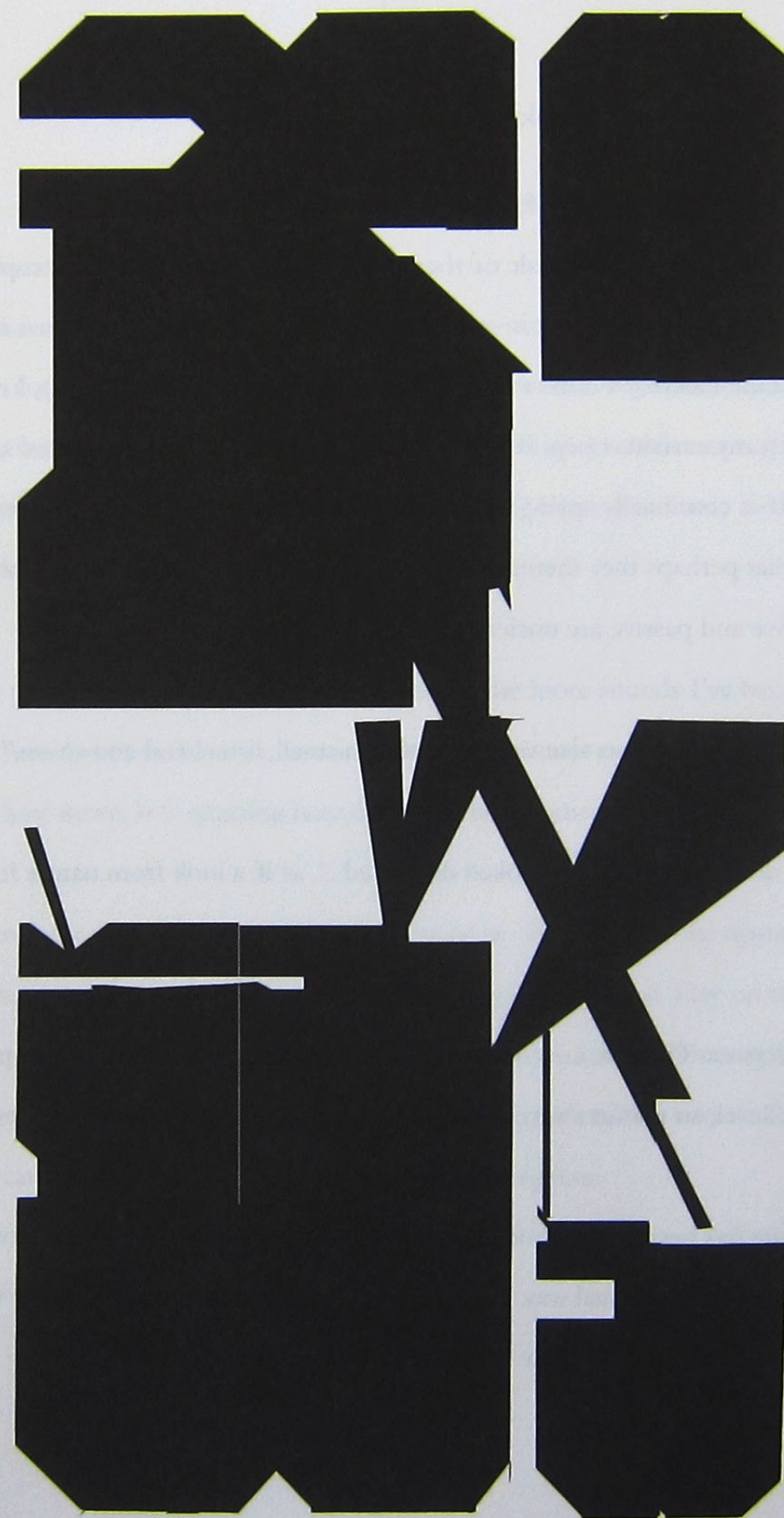


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1. Looking and being looked at

Annotations of the book *Memo Barthes*² (p. 78):

"Directly opposite my house, on the other side of the street, is a flat which looks unoccupied, but sometimes...I notice there's something about it - a light that goes on at night, an arm that opens a window and closes it again. Based on the fact that I don't see anyone myself and sit and look (stare), I conclude I am not being watched - and keep my curtains open. But perhaps the opposite is true. Who knows, perhaps someone hiding himself or herself is continually spying me on. The moral of this story could be that someone who is always looking forgets that perhaps they themselves are being looked at. Or maybe, with the verb 'to look' the boundaries between active and passive are unclear."

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"...All the senses can... 'look', and also vice versa: a look can smell, listen, feel and so on."

"Sometimes people say disapprovingly: 'He looked distracted...', as if a look from nature has to be direct and controlled."

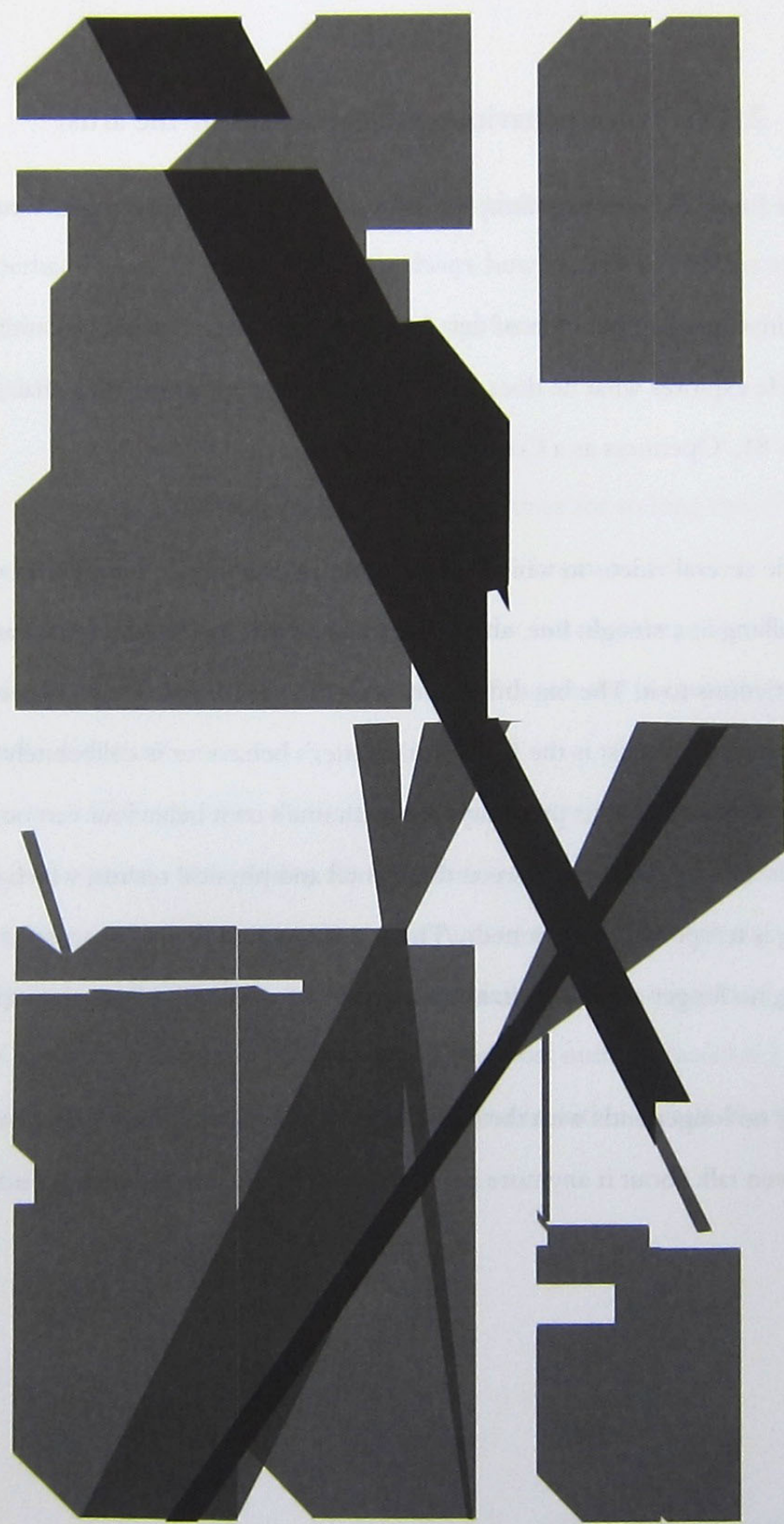
"But that's not the way it goes. There is ...in our relationship to things... something that passes by and is handed on from level to level, so that in a way it is always being expelled - that 's what people call the look."

Looking at my neighbours has become an almost uncontrollable impulse since I began working on my project *The Neighbours* (2006). It began in a casual way. Now I always just take a look when I enter the room. Now it is hard *not* to look, at some times I need to draw the curtains to stop myself.

This applies even more to hearing the neighbours above me. In the six months they've lived here, my home has changed. They have taken over my space. I went mad with irritation lying awake on my bed and so I decided to reverse the roles by taking the noise they made as a starting point. Ironically, I now miss them if I don't hear them for a minute and I am glad of any strange new sound they start to make. Listening to them gives me a feeling of being busy with something (acute and exciting). I was devastated when they insulated their floor with new underlay flooring. I *think* it is new but I can't be sure as I only hear their sounds and I have never met them.

The more I became preoccupied with my neighbours' noise, the more sounds I've begun to notice. My ears have become more sensitive to detail since listening to my neighbours even for the subtlest of sounds. When visiting someone, I hear more. It is amazing how often you hear someone coughing in the house next door.

At first I couldn't work properly as I was constantly irritated by the sound of the upstairs neighbours. I was cross with myself that something so trifling could loom so large in my head. I lay on the bed. I tried for a while not to hear anything; it forced itself on the periphery of my consciousness, like a hum, like a dripping tap. I was quite astonished when I realised that this could lead to my making a work. Precisely because it is so trifling. Precisely because it is on the edge of my conscious perception.



2. One's own behaviour and the senses of the artist

Annotations of *Moderne Leegte*³ (*Modern Emptiness*) on the work of Bruce Nauman and Vitto Acconci, around 1970.

"The starting point lay in a circular definition of art. Art is what the artist does in his studio. So what does the artist do in his studio? He explores what he does there - walking around, sitting on a chair, drinking coffee, playing with a ball..." (p. 81, 'Openness as a Condition').

Bruce Nauman has made several videos in which he performs an everyday activity, like bouncing a ball against the ceiling or walking in a straight line, and enlarged upon this by maintaining it for as long as possible or attaching certain restrictions to it. The big difference, according to *Moderne Leegte*, between an 'ordinary' person's behaviour and that of an artist is the fact that the latter's behaviour is deliberately made *public*. That the behaviour is the subject matter: "This preoccupation with one's own behaviour can be explained by the fact that behaviour fulfils a hinge function between the mental and physical realms, which means the question of intention or meaning is temporarily postponed... The possibility that (being an artist) is a generic activity (a general state of being, no longer a trade or an assortment of specialisms), places the artist's behaviour in an entirely new light."

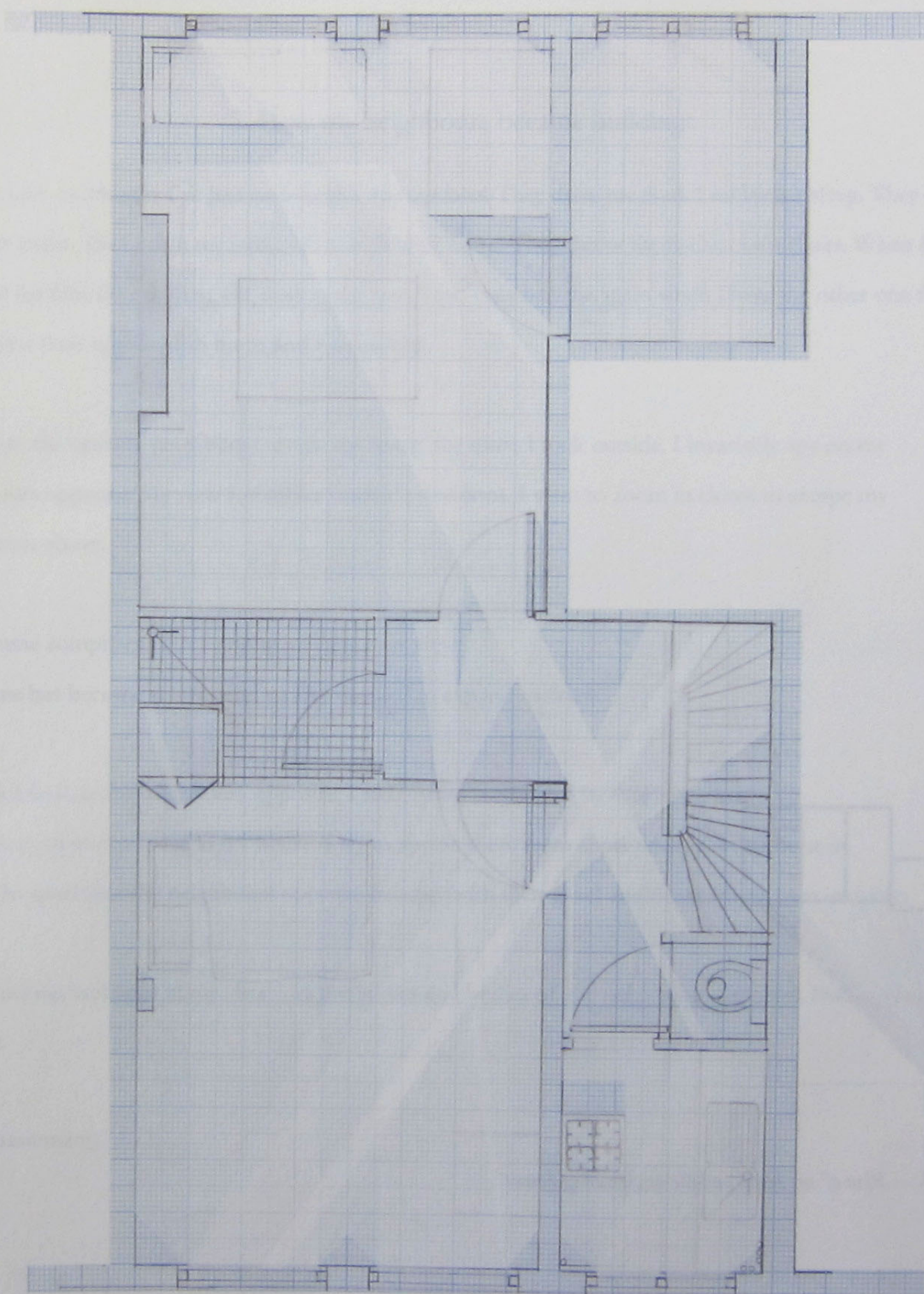
The image (or the work) no longer ends with the boundaries of the canvas, it no longer has to be on a canvas, and perhaps you can't even talk about it anymore in terms of an image, but rather as an activity or happening.

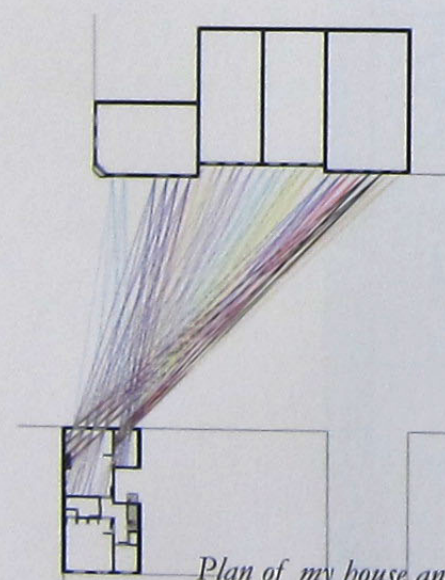
This revealing of one's behaviour, thoughts, habits, domicile obviously takes on many levels and forms but in essence belongs perhaps to art. What is different is always how explicit this occurs and how the personal aspect within the work changes into something else. The sight and sound of my neighbours seems much too trivial to me to use it as subject matter.

I tend to think long about an idea before carrying it out. Sometimes for so long that the idea becomes a stumbling block, which makes it difficult (impossible even?) to begin. So what I do is simply begin somewhere. The interesting thing for me about the senses is the fact that they precede everything else – that I *hear* before I think, I *see* before I think. My senses have become the boundaries of my awareness, the boundaries of my individual space.

Imperceptibly, the process of being aware of the upstairs neighbours in my daily routines reached the point where one Friday night I realised I was waiting for their shoes to fall next to the bed. I knew how this would sound. I knew that this would be followed by the dreary hum of the satellite dish above my window. I was, I realised, constantly preoccupied with them: people I once briefly spoke to over the phone but with whom I never actually met. I know their bedroom habits down to the most intimate (acoustic) details.

I tried earplugs but I can't sleep with those things in. I feel shut in within myself. But what is there in myself that I would want to shut in?





Plan of my house and the neighbouring houses

For the past six months
awake at night. They cr
at 4 am. the first shoe is
Thereafter their satellite

The more the upstairs r
neighbours opposite. M
neighbours above.

Your home comprises
My home has become

Because I look at the n
In this way they own s
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I start making building
can live.

(Artist statement)

3. How my neighbours became buildings

For the past six months I've had new neighbours upstairs. They drive me mad. I no longer sleep. They come awake at night. They crush my living space with their noise. They throw themselves into chairs. When finally at 4 am. the first shoe is flung off next to the bed, I can only breathe again when I hear the other one follow. Thereafter their satellite dish hums and I fall asleep.

The more the upstairs neighbours invade my space, the more I look outside. I invariably spy on my neighbours opposite. My view resembles stacked televisions. I want to zoom in closer to escape my neighbours above.

Your home comprises your living space plus your view.

My home has become smaller and so I've decided to expand my view.

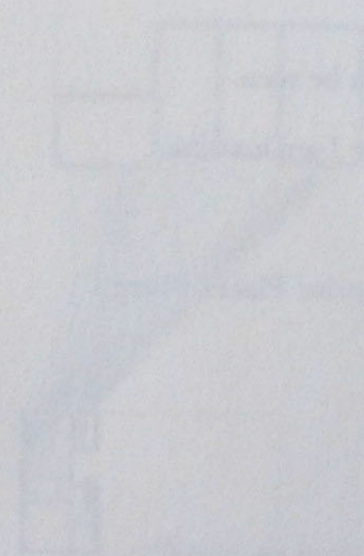
Because I look at the neighbours opposite, I realise they might also be looking at me.

In this way they own space in my house. I try to spy on them from spots where I won't be seen.

I map the spots that the neighbours opposite occupy (with their gaze) and those where I am invisible.

I start making buildings in my view – in the homes and bodies of the neighbours opposite. Places where I can live.

(Artist statement)





I try to imagine them, but the image remains vague. I imagine them as people who often go to the local gym (on the corner), with something inflated about them, as if they've been carefully pumped up to a critical point. But what am I actually basing this on? Also, it isn't their physical appearance that keeps me awake. It is the space they take up in my home with their sound, since this makes me always aware of them.

When my nephew was four he used to think that he was hiding himself by placing his hands over his eyes. Family members took part in the ritual and he completely believed it. As a five year old he still attempted to make himself invisible however his belief was waning.

If you sit under a blanket when you are four you are invisible. It 'feels' logical but it isn't, you don't see anyone and so no one sees you. There is some thing fundamentally instinctive about this. Pedestrians can become catatonic in the middle of the road when they see traffic approaching. It is animal instinct, felt by the body but not by commonsense, that if you remain still you are not there, such as deer caught in headlights?

Because I hear my neighbours, they've actually infiltrated my space: not with their bodies but with their sound. They disturb what my home is for me – a place where I can do what I want and others can't.

The silence of my home is my home. My private space. But what is this silence in fact? It is not what I would term real silence. There are the birds, my fridge hums, and cars drive past. However, that is the background noise to my home, I am used to it. When I walk in a very quiet forest my private space expands. I draw

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in a deep breath. I look ahead. Slowly I relax my body. If a dog barks a long way away, or another walker approaches, my space shrinks slightly again. In the city I protect myself. Honking cars don't affect me. In the train I am increasingly bothered by MP3 mobiles playing at full blast (why bother with a headset). At first I try to ignore it – it is only music, they're so far away from me, it is a free country and so on – but gradually it drives me mad. My private space shrinks and shrinks until I am forced to engage with music I don't want to hear.

There is a prodigious link between sound, space and awareness.

The notion of *background* sound, already has something spatial about it like a kind of environment, a private room you can always – when it is quiet – take with you. Certain people might feel exactly like this about a lot of sound, which is then their 'background' and perhaps they feel uneasy when it is missing. Unexpected noise is saying that this private space doesn't exist, especially noise from which you can't escape and about which you can't do anything. A dripping tap is less frustrating as I know I can also switch it off, but the neighbour's noise is uncontrollable. The only thing I can do is adjust to it, or phone them up and hear my phone upstairs, or have the music very loud, which gives a kind of temporary satisfaction. If my upstairs neighbours are unexpectedly quiet, something strange happens. The quietness drives me mad. It is like a story I read about a man who every night was resigned to hearing his upstairs neighbour throwing off his shoes one by one. One night, the upstairs neighbour, in a sudden fit of awareness after having taken off one shoe, thinks the sound is antisocial. He is overcome with guilt. With the precision of a moon landing, he then places the right-hand

shoe next to the other. After fifteen minutes he wakes up with a start. He hears a voice crying: 'For goodness sake, take the other shoe off, then I can get some sleep!' I am now so used to my neighbours' routine sounds that they've become almost my background noise and indeed I now notice when they're *missing*.

Sleeping comes closest to the archetypical ideal home. It is frustrating if you can't sleep at night. You are driven out of the illusion of peace and quiet that is your home. When I am asleep I am not aware of my sleeping body. Everyone knows you remain lying in your bed and that it is only in cartoons you go flying out of the window. If the body is free of consciousness, how do I know what my body does when I am sleeping? I have an idea, but I can never *know*. This uncontrollability, the state in which you are hardly aware anymore, is reassuring. My private space can expand so much that I have no knowledge of this myself. When I sleep I am invisible, just like my small nephew.

4. Matta-Clark's Fake Estates



Matta-Clark's
"Splitting"

While thinking about the space occupied by my neighbours in my home, and how I, in the same way, could occupy spaces in theirs, I came across some photographs by a man, Gordon Matta-Clark, who seemed almost able to cut through architectural spaces with his gaze (fortunately he doesn't live opposite me). In particular his, partly completed, project *Fake Estates* changed my look on the neighbours forever. I want to touch briefly on his work here and then return to my neighbours to see if there are any similarities between them, my sound space (silence) and Matta-Clark's *Fake Estates*.

Whereas I still have difficulty spying through windows and almost feel caught in the act when a neighbour sees me, Matta-Clark simply removes a wall or he slices the building in two. Jeffrey Lew, with whom Matta-Clark opened a gallery on 112 Greene Street, New York (later known as the White Columns) in order to be able to show their initial work (no other gallery wanted it), says about the beginning of this enterprise: "Most galleries won't let you put a scratch on the floor, here you can cut a hole in it." The many beautiful photos and collages Matta-Clark made are deceptive. They look like charming, crooked, stuck-together buildings with white spaces and lines or with extraordinary perspectives. They are also graphically appealing because of their spatiality. To me they are truly beautiful, however, because the spaces continually invoke a mental space. Time and again the idea creeps up on you of looking at the internal workings of a head. Only in memory can rooms be so oddly connected to each other. One wall suddenly affords a three hundred and sixty degree view or in one glance you take in a corridor as well as a ceiling, wall, floor and staircase. For Matta-Clark it is not about the illusion of reality. As art critic Michael Kimmelman puts it so wonderfully in his article *Inspiration from real estate rejects* in *The New York Times*⁴: "But his art wasn't only about turning squalid architecture into sculpture. Property could have its own metabolism, he thought. It evolved. It could be traded, like stocks, making its value, its status, abstract. His broader interest was in inaccessible, forlorn spots: in the spaces inside walls, in ambiguous, in-between places around the city that are left over by bureaucratic neglect or fiat, and that go unnoticed or that can't actually be seen. He was interested in the topology of absence: places



Matta-Clark's
"Splitting"

physically unloosed, elegiac sites, intensely felt. They awaited his intervention, through which people might picture the city afresh, might reconsider notions of property and ownership and social exchange - the forces that govern our lives."

Matta-Clark grew up as the son of an immigrant, Roberto Matta, an already famous Chilean Surrealist painter. His parents quickly divorced and his mother raised him. They lived at the time in Soho, now a hip area for shopping and nights out, but then an unsavoury neighbourhood with many empty apartment buildings. It is there that inspiration for the building as an organism must have started. This fascination also led to his uncompleted project *Fake Estates*. "In the early 1970s... Matta-Clark discovered that periodically New York City, rooting around for petty tax revenue, auctioned off 'gutter space' - tiny, irregular, inaccessible or otherwise unusable parcels of land, the remnants of surveying errors or other zoning anomalies.

They often consisted of only a strip of curb or the edge of an alleyway or some tiny, locked-in plot at the intersection of several backyards. The lots went for as little as \$25, for which the city hoped to collect \$7 or \$8 a year in taxes, generally less, as auditors would find out later, than it cost New York to administer of the lots. Matta-Clark bought 15 parcels, 14 in Queens and 1 in Staten Island. When he died of cancer at 35, in 1978, he left behind the deeds and their unpaid tax bills. Apparently, he had vaguely thought about installing art on the plots or giving plots to artists to install their art, although the properties were really too impractical to use. Years after he died, his widow, Jane Crawford, coming upon the documents in a box, devised collages that consisted of the deeds, photographs and maps - surrogate versions of the property, not unlike the 'non-sites' by his mentor and fellow entropist Robert Smithson." By photographing, selling and documenting these remnants of zoning anomalies, Matta-Clark appropriated them for himself. By including them in his vision and describing them as 'fake estate', or non-space, he also made them into mental spaces and part of his mental property. By publicly appropriating them, he gave meaning to these slivers of land. Kimmelman continues: "Matta-Clark also appeared in a video ... in which he wandered around hunting for his properties



Matta Clark's "Fake Estates" project



Matta Clark's "Splitting"

knocking on doors, encountering touchy neighbours and dutifully chalking off tiny strips of driveway or peering through chain-link fences at some nondescript little patch of weeds, which he had determined belonged to him". This delineation is important as it also happened in his later work, in his photographs, in the form of a fake drawing of a cross-section he wanted to make (or make in his mind). Matta-Clark appropriated the means to do his project not only from architects and demolition workers (by roughly cutting out holes with a milling machine, tearing down structures, sawing, using a cutting torch, to name but a few) but even from the way of thinking of a land speculator (the registration and purchasing of buildings). He used this in order to reveal what a building means for people, what it *is*. He dismantled a building like an organism, an object to be swapped and a social object that can be sold, built, lived-in and demolished. An organism, which because of all these notions attached to it, could also be a mental object. He reveals the buildings as mental spaces and transforms them temporarily into something that is worthless (a wreck) and priceless (an art work) in equal measure. This revealing of the building is done literally by tearing down the shell, but done in a unique manner by making the demolition process the means instead of the objective. I have no idea whether he himself felt he was preoccupied with mental spaces. Perhaps that would have been of little interest, or help to him in his work. For me, however, there is an evident link. He always seemed to want to make buildings that didn't exist. He built by taking away and thereby exposing the composition of a wall. We are shown not the wall but our illusion of it: the wall as a solid and absolute thing, safekeeping us from the outside world by hiding it - all this made visible through a hole. That which he removed was in fact his building. He emphasised this 'building' (which didn't exist) within a building. At the same time this building that doesn't exist can be a metaphor for the mental space and is more present and robust than the real building. By collecting slivers of land, which nobody wanted, he focused attention on these. He outlined them in chalk so that you were aware of where they were - in places where you wouldn't even want to let out your dog - and therefore they became bigger *mentally*. Thus they were slotted together into one mental area created by Matta-Clark, almost until they became the spaces of a new building. Unfortunately (or not?) it never came to that.

5. How my neighbours became buildings II

Sometimes you come across a gap between two houses: an excavation, or a field, an address without a house. You can tell that something once stood there. I always enjoy looking at these kinds of spaces. I find them beautiful yet desolate, indeed more moving to look at than most buildings. Perhaps I should come forward and reveal I am an architect. What surprises people the most is why I became one. How did I succeed in studying so long but then never wanted to build any buildings? I only wanted to photograph, draw, live in and think about buildings, but I *have never built* any.

Architecture only began to really interest me again when I decided to make buildings of my neighbours. When I decided to enlarge the space of my view. Looking at the neighbours has radically altered my house (rebuilt it you could almost say), in a more fundamental way than if I'd had a new roof put on. The neighbours' noise has become part of my abode, has nestled itself in, and made a new house of it.

What then is *this silence*, which was first there and which my neighbours have taken over?

As Barthes puts it (see²): "There is ... in our relationship to things... something that passes by and is handed on from level to level, so that in a way it is always being expelled - that 's what people call *the look*'".

And that's the way it is. It is my own sound-space and the degree in which this can absorb me - that is this silence. Not the neighbours irritating me, nor their noise is the real intrusion, but how that noise took hold of me, and has possessed my thoughts.

I don't like Beethoven anymore than I do a lot of other music. But if I hear his music, for instance if I take my father's iPod by mistake, it sends me back to being seven, sitting behind the family sofa and listening while leafing through a book. The stillness of this memory is overwhelming; Beethoven represents silence for me, a silence with firm walls.

But that is not what I *think* about when I am listening; it is not an active listening. I am allowing it to wash over me and perhaps that is exactly why it is so pleasurable.

This linking of sound, space and awareness is therefore extremely personal. It is different for everyone. It is linked to a personal memory or association. It is perhaps more like a smell than an image. It hangs in the air, it fills the space, can envelope me, can make a space small or even big. When the neighbour walks above my head (even if it is not heavy) the floor and walls resonate to his steps. The sound is more spacious than the actual ceiling of my room, which is unable to prevent the sound.

Why, when I bought an electric guitar was I so ecstatic about the sound of the speaker making it seem as if I was playing in a church in a Piranesi drawing?

Like smell, sound can apparently transport you to associations before you've even had time to think about them. Also thinking is often associated with seeing (i.e. he can't *see* the problem, it began to *dawn* on me), while sound more with instinct (something *whispered* in your ear).

Do you have more space if you don't think about other things? Perhaps that's why you suddenly have fantastic ideas while sitting on the WC, under the shower or in a lift. There isn't much to see. Nothing to distract you and so your private space expands. There is all the space for hearing and feeling. I've recorded the sounds of my neighbours. While playing their sound back to them, the space they occupy in my house I can likewise occupy in theirs, or somewhere else entirely. Background noise takes up a space altogether different than a conversation. It is on the periphery of the space, yet is everywhere.

I've begun to collect the neighbours' sounds so as to also occupy space in other spaces. I want to bring my background sounds into other spaces. In the same way Matta-Clark collected fake estates and gave them meaning by appropriating them for himself, so I want to collect neighbours' sounds. Sound makes spaces that don't exist but which becomes spatial the moment someone hears it. Then space arises in that person because I've made their private space smaller as the sound digs deep into them, expanding and making rooms and corridors. Perhaps, on the other hand, their private space becomes larger, as the sound reminds them of something, something totally unexpected that only has meaning for them. But it always has to be in the background, among other sounds in the spot where I play it back. Apparently no spot exists *without* sound. Perhaps my project will never be finished and I wind up sifting through a plastic bag full of sounds for the next occupier of my house.

How many spaces fit in a plastic bag? With each additional sound I find, something changes the space that it contains. Each time a room, a gate, threshold, cat flap or other association is added. It will be a lifelong study.

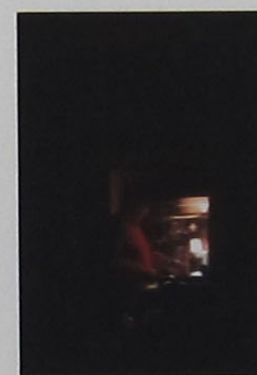
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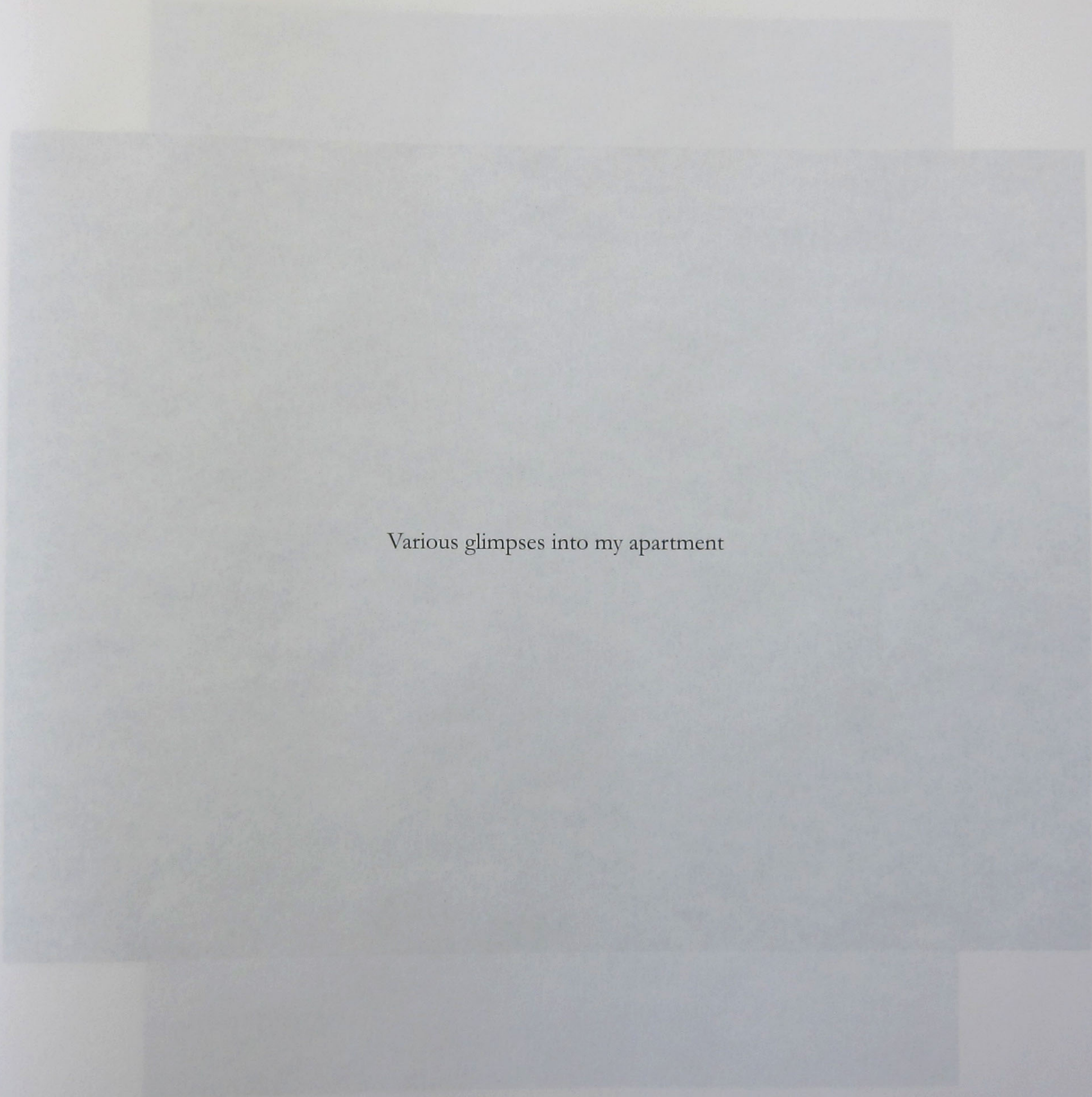
Used or quoted sources

1. My neighbours.
2. *Memo Barthes* – by various authors. The quote used is by Roland Barthes himself (Vantilt & Yang, 2004).
Translated from the Dutch original for this artist book.
3. *Moderne leegte (Modern Emptiness)* - Camiel van Winkel, (SUN 1999).
Translated from the Dutch original for this artist book.
4. *Inspiration from Real Estate Rejects* - Michael Kimmelman (*The New York Times*, 9 September, 2005).
5. *Gordon Matta-Clark* - Corinne Diserens et al, (Phaidon 2003).

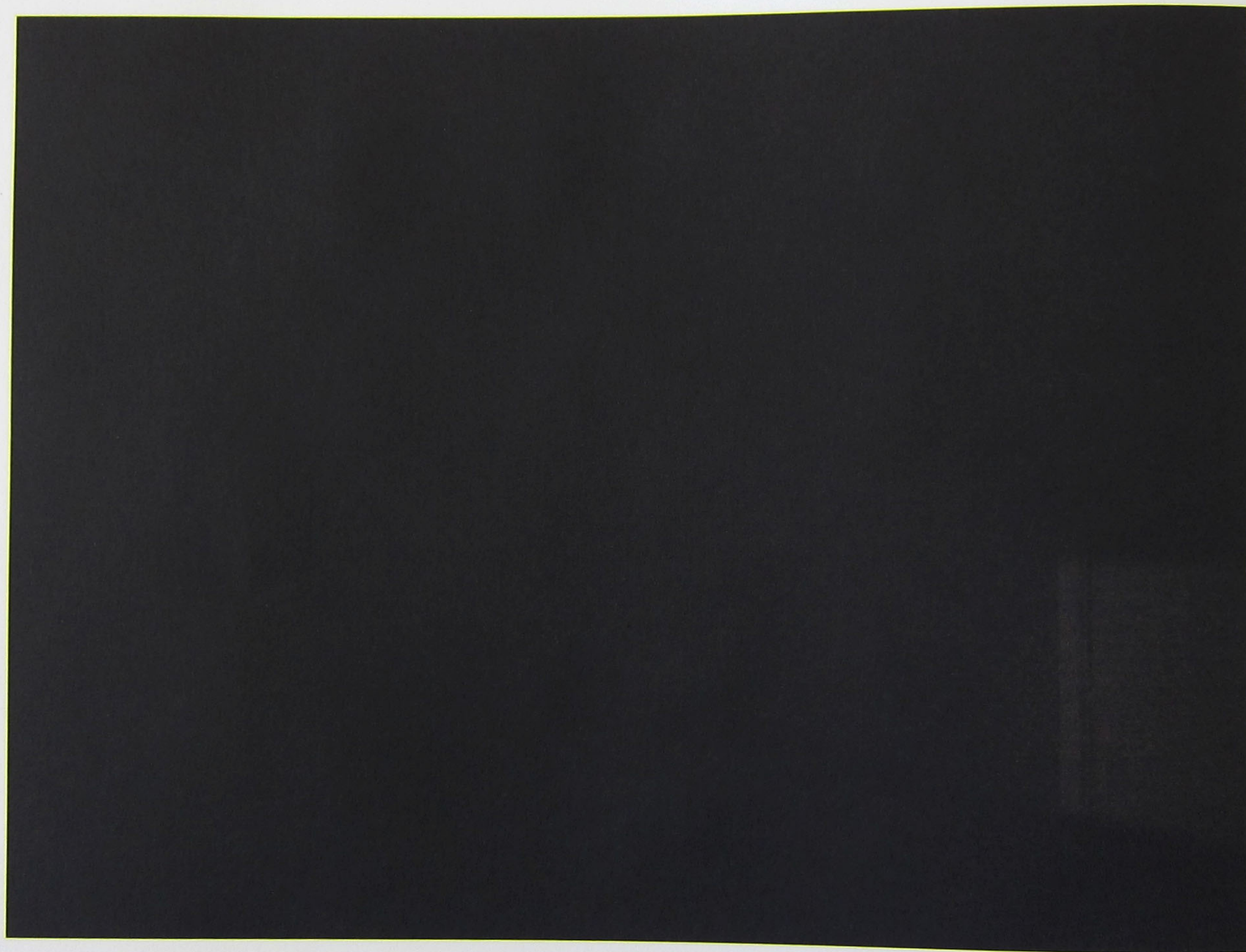
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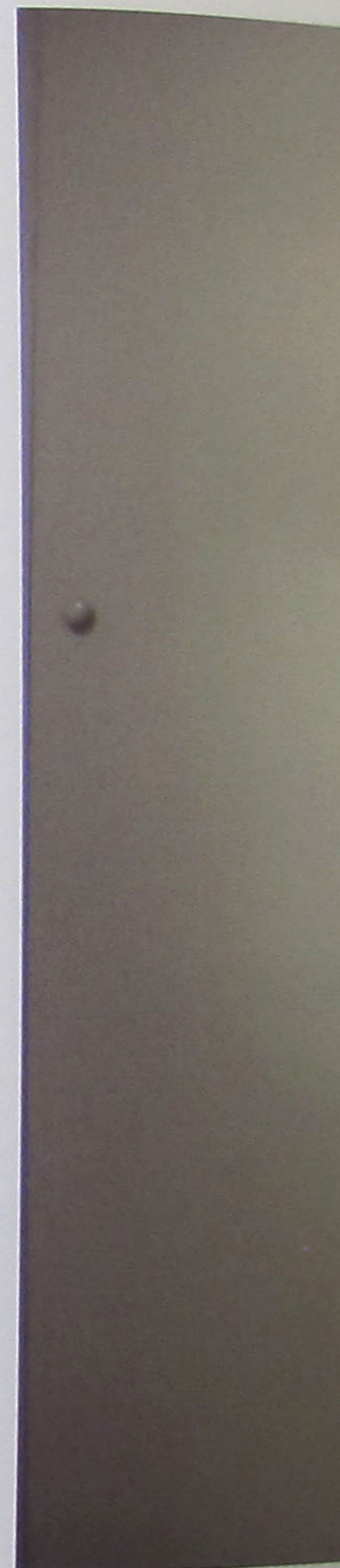




Various glimpses into my apartment

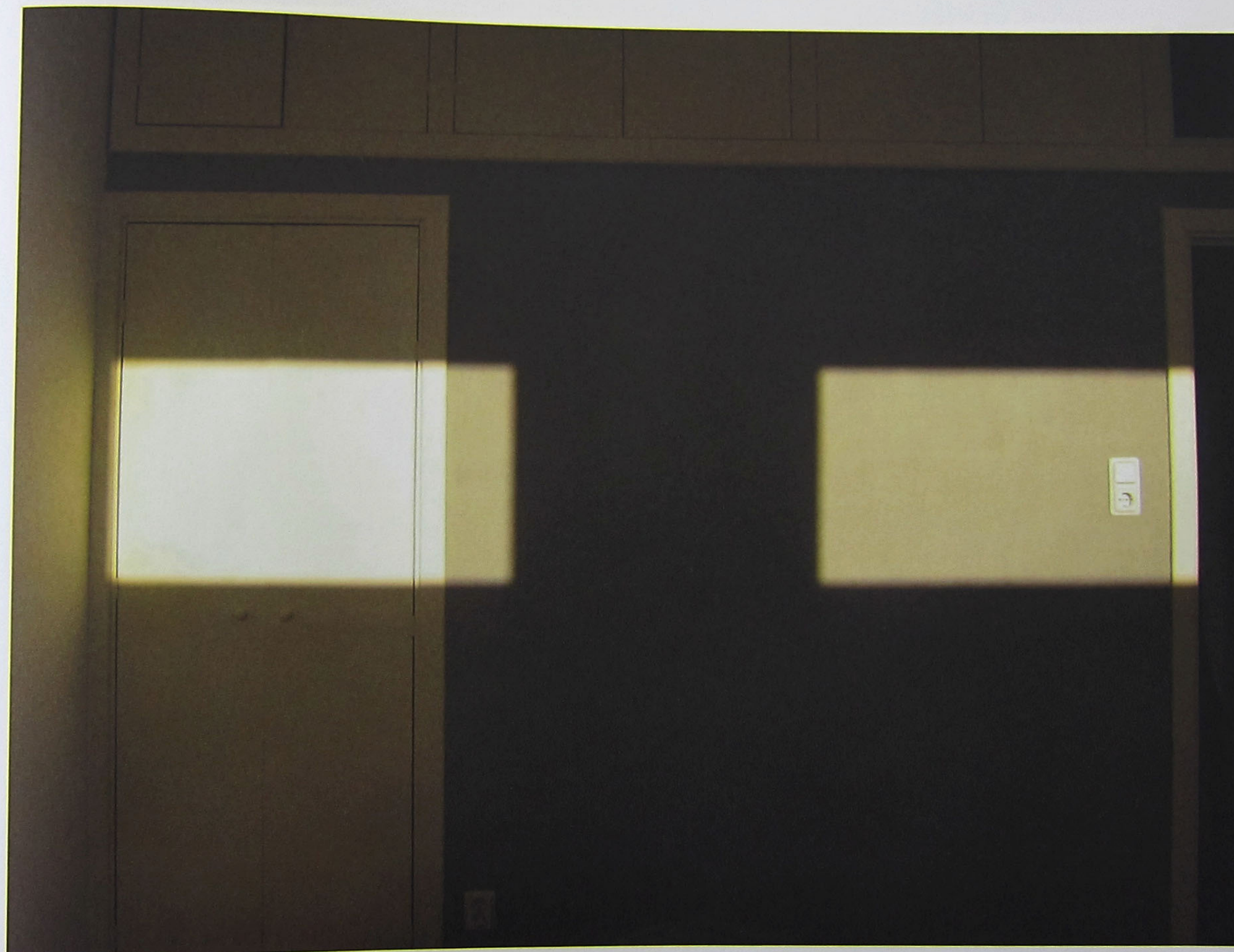


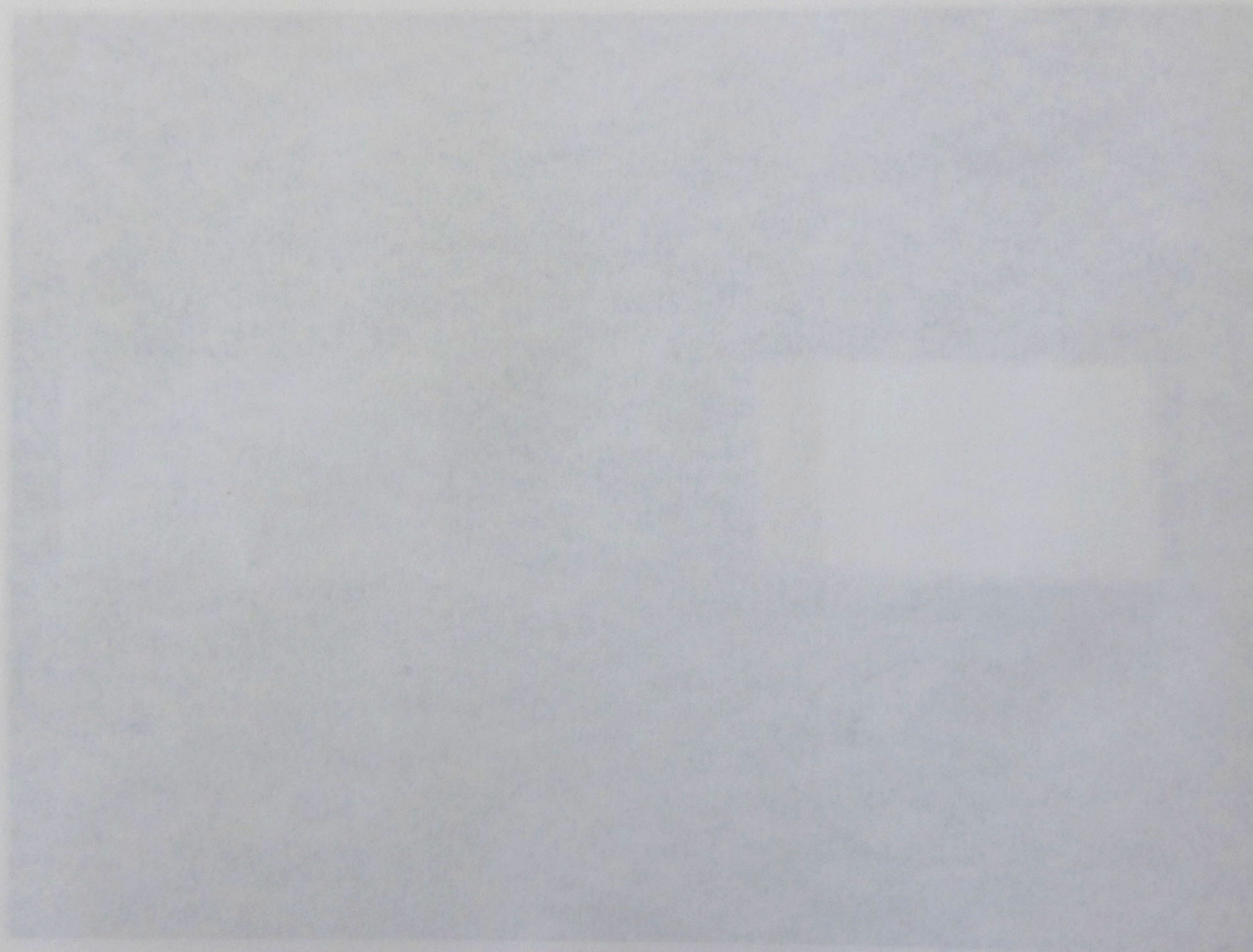








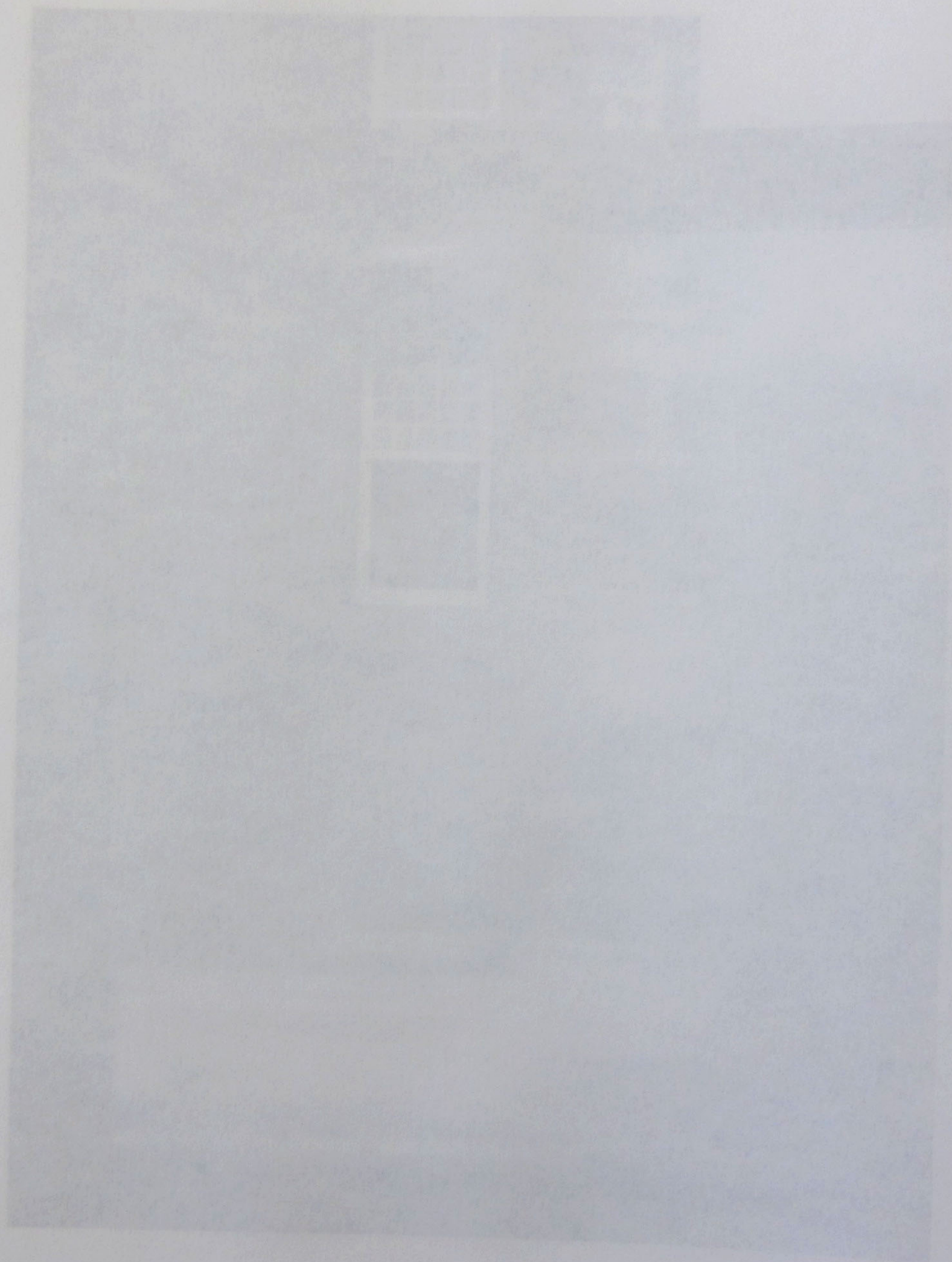


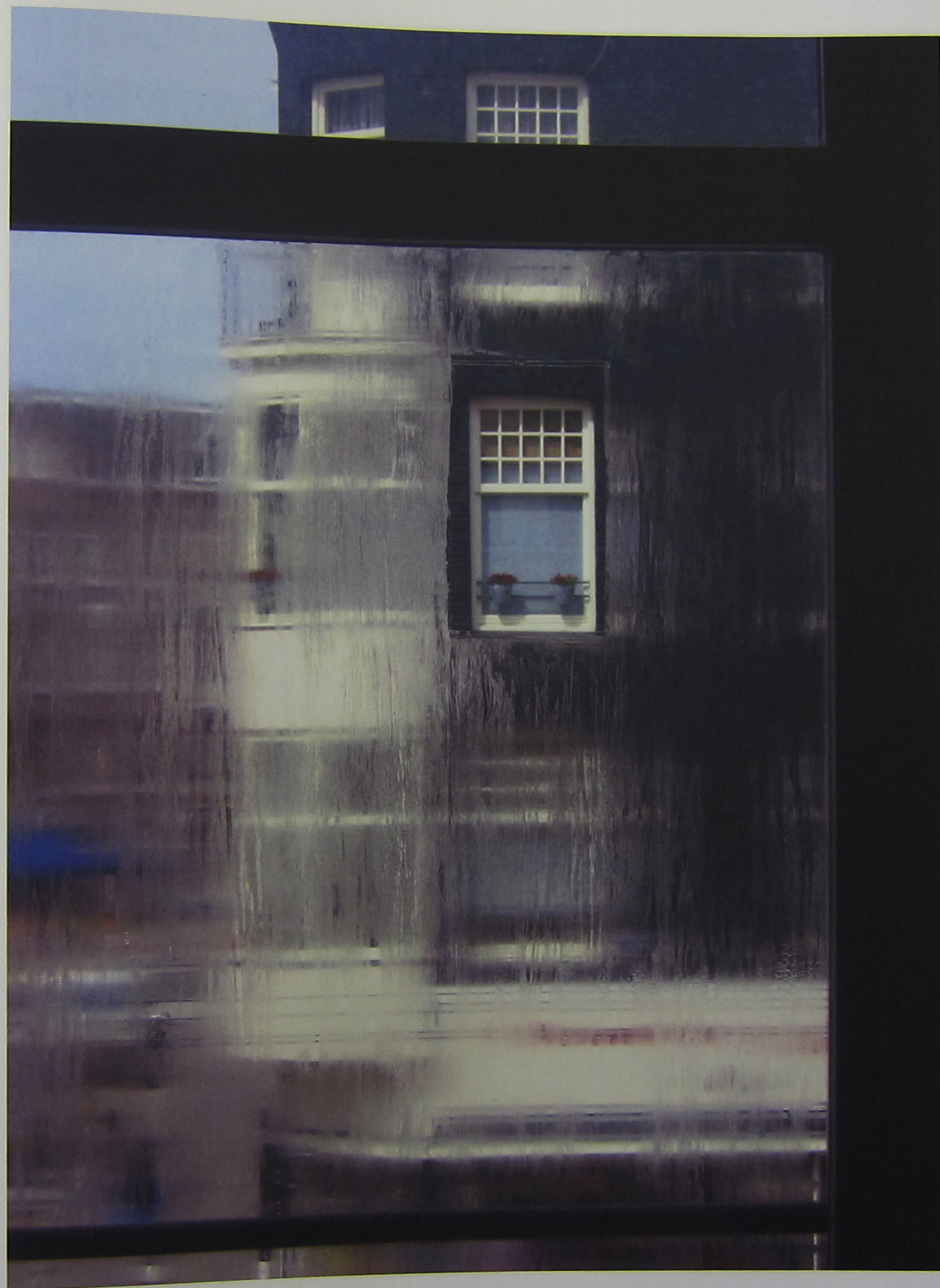


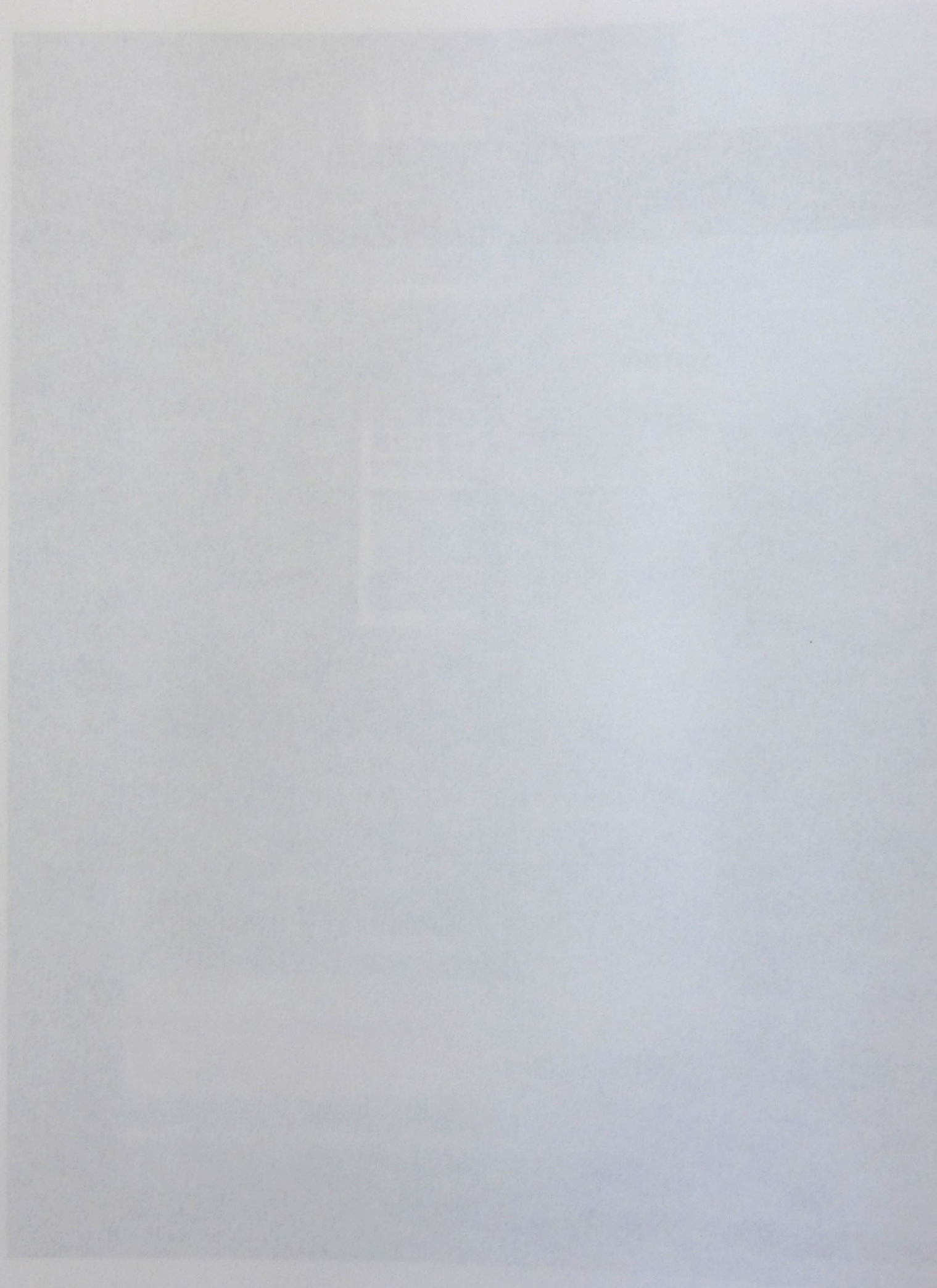
Looking at the neighbour opposite

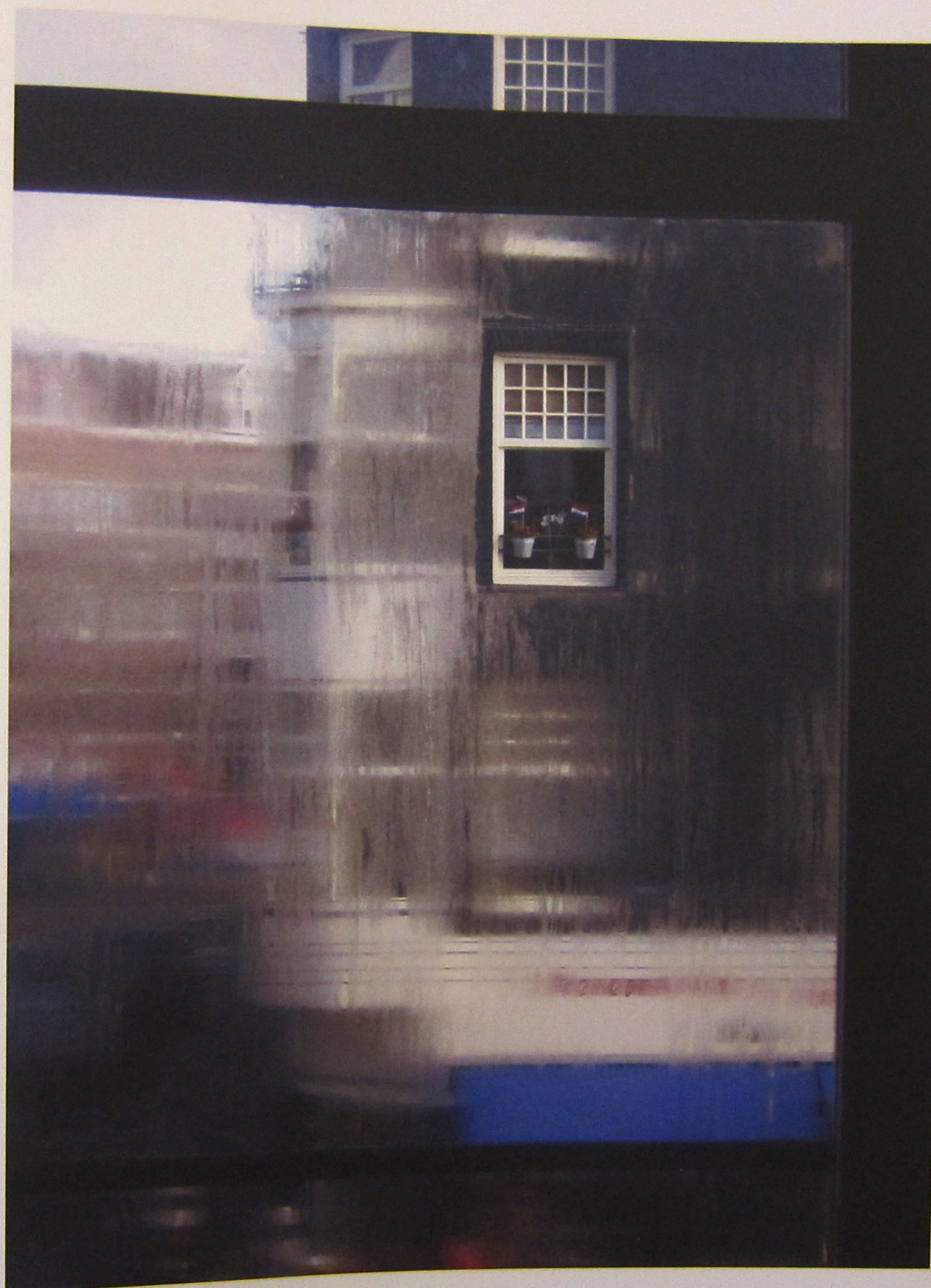
I smear Vix VapoRub on my window in order to increase the space in my neighbour opposite

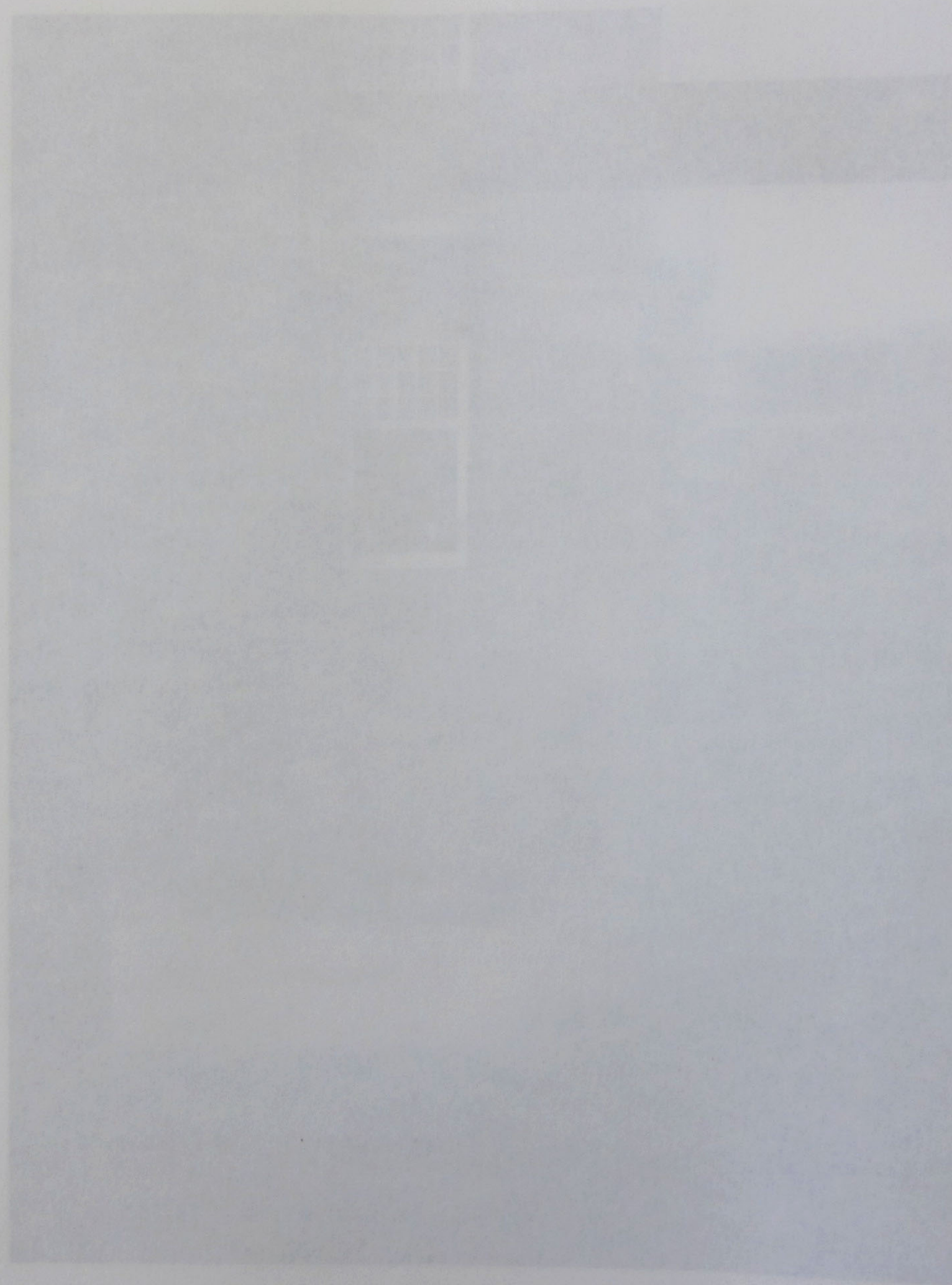












Letter to my neighbours

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First floor apartment with through lounge, Amsterdam 9 April 2010

Dear Upstairs Neighbours,

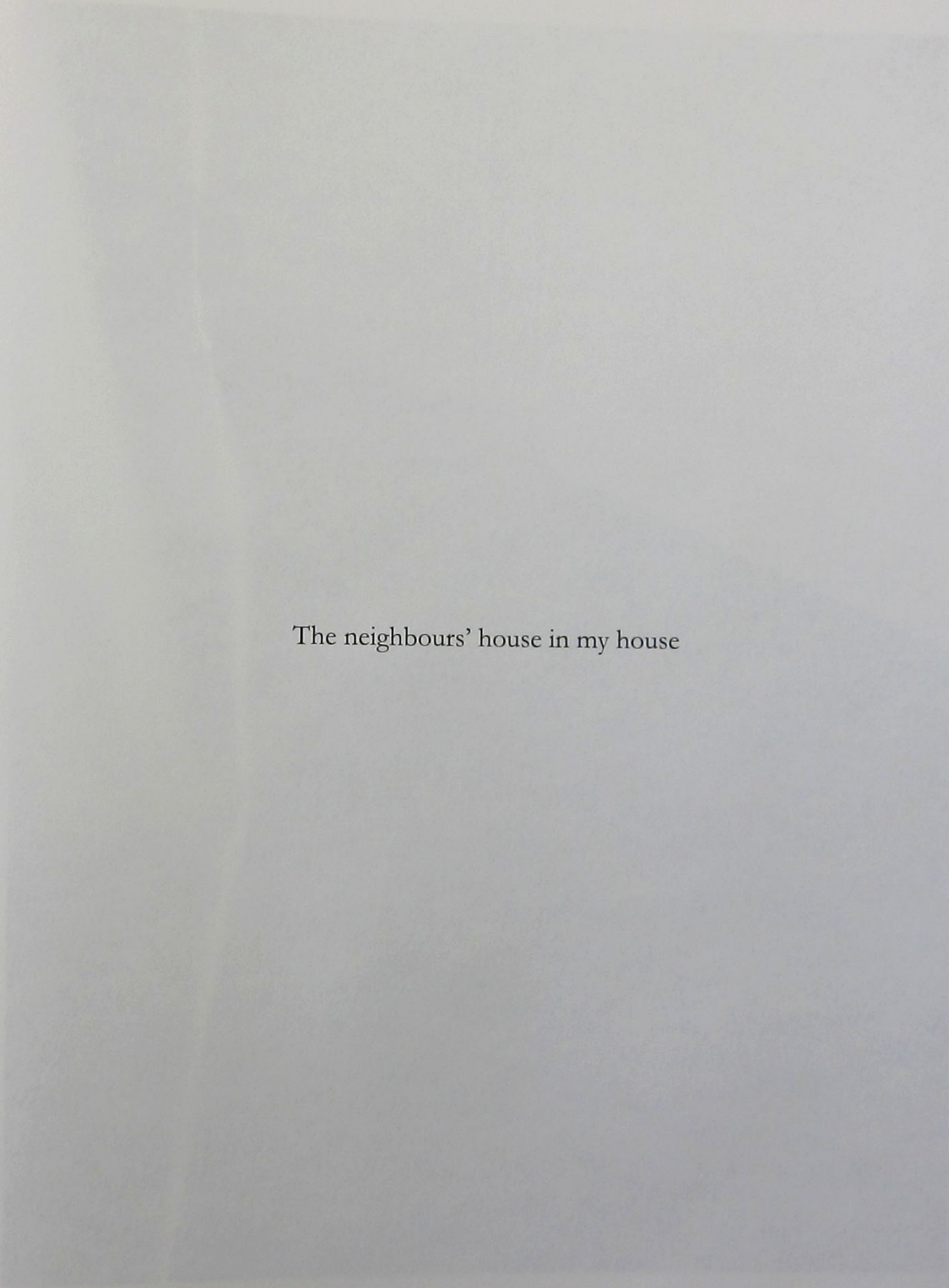
After making a calculation, I've come to the conclusion that you take up 80 percent of my apartment with your sound. I would therefore kindly ask you to pay the corresponding amount of my rent forthwith.

Summary:

Total rent 500 Euro.

80% of this equals 500 divided by 100 times 80, equals 400 Euro per month. Please transfer this sum onto my account number 46.68.26.370.

Thanking you in advance.



The neighbours' house in my house













Colophon

This artist book consists of
artist. Inner paper: *Hi-speed*
made public without the arti
which he took himself. Whe
The artist would like to than
© Sarah van Sonsbeeck 2010

Colophon

This artist book consists of an edition of 500 signed and numbered copies printed by *Lecturis* (Eindhoven), developed from a prototype by the artist. Inner paper: *Hi-speed Opaque* 70 gram. Cover: *Distinction Publishing White*, 320 gram. No part of this book may be published or otherwise made public without the artist's previous written consent. All photographs were taken by the artist apart from those in the section on Matta-Clark, which he took himself. Wherever possible titles are given. This book was realised with the generous support of the Fonds BKVB (Amsterdam).

The artist would like to thank her parents, Juha van 't Zelfde, Johan Deumens, Gino Saccone, John Lonsdale and her neighbours.

© Sarah van Sonsbeeck 2010

Colophon

The text book contains a number of illustrations and exercises. The illustrations are designed to help the student understand the text. The exercises are designed to help the student practice the material. The text book is designed to be used in a classroom or at home. It is a valuable resource for students and teachers alike.

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