Curiosity
What happens when the Earth begins to look extraterrestrial, when we look at a photograph and can’t determine what we’re looking at?

Between 1943 and 1945 Frederick Sommer made several photographs of the Sonoran Desert near his home in Arizona. They depict bone-dry hilltops without buttes, strewn evenly with rocks and dotted with cacti. Shot in black and white with a large-format camera, they oscillate for the eye between flatness and the receding space of incidental detail. There are no traces of human presence, and even the vantage point where Sommer placed his camera offers us little mystery.

Photography is usually a matter of projecting three dimensions onto two, via an aperture. It is a medium of distances and perspectives. This means that making sense of it is never just a matter of recognizing what is depicted; it also involves knowing from where it has been depicted. An unconventional vantage point may render abstract even the most optically clear photograph. Likewise an apparently abstract photograph may cohere once we know its point of view. The more one looks at Sommer’s landscapes the more disconcerting they become, both as pictures and as records of the world. With a poet’s economy he spoke of each image as a constellation, a word that might suggest something prosaic, like a gathering or an assembly. In astronomy a constellation is an arbitrary formation of stars perceived as a figure or design. It’s the seeking of pattern that turns the chaos into order.

Sommer’s photographs are as carefully composed as any, yet they ruffle our composer. We might say they are composed to show the essentially uncomposed, unnervingly brute fact of nature from which we are alienated by our very capacity to contemplate it. These are not landscapes fashioned to reflect back our wishes, our domination, or even our physical scale. They are alien.

In 1944 two of Sommer’s desert photographs appeared in the American Surrealist journal *FVII*, spread over two pages. At first glance they seemed to resemble a pair of stereoscopic images, promising the clarity of a third dimension. But each is quite singular; in fact, their pairing only doubles their individual disturbances. In 1962 a similar layout appeared in an issue of *Aperture* magazine dedicated to Sommer’s work. These were the only landscapes amid the still lifes and collages for which he is best known, but they are just as ambiguous. Surrealist photography tended to explore claustrophobic spaces as metaphors for the darkly malleable space of the unconscious. For Sommer the great outdoors and its blinding light were just as unfathomable, their beauty always a little disturbing.
What happens when we look at a photograph but cannot figure out what it is of? Never mind what it means, just what it is of? Most images aim to be easy, so this is not something we face often. But those moments when our basic recognition is challenged may tell us a lot about the ways in which habits of seeing shape the pleasure and knowledge offered by photographs.

In the realm of photography particularly, abstraction is a fraught term that tends to be named by opposing it to figuration. But they are inseparable, one haunting the other, and forcing them apart does not help us to understand the medium. Indeed, their separation has led to great confusion about everything from the real and realism to form and formalism. These ideas may be explored through two types of image that seem at first to be furthest from abstraction: the landscape photograph and the forensic photograph.

There are certain images that play both roles, or seem to. In 1963 the Parisian journal Littérature published an image attributed to Man Ray with a caption suggesting it was a landscape viewed from an airplane. The new perspectives of aerial-intelligence photography had entered the popular imagination in the years following World War I, but Man Ray’s photograph was not a landscape at all. It was a close-range study of dust accumulating on a sheet of glass for what was to become Marcel Duchamp’s sculpture La Marie mise à nu par ses habilaties, même (The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even, also known as the Large Glass, 1915–23). Man Ray cropped the image to leave no marginal evidence that this was Duchamp’s Manhattan studio. Only later was the photograph given its familiar title Étude de nuances, or Dust B Wow.”

While Sommer’s purist landscapes are now regarded as supreme modernist pictures, Man Ray’s splicing of photography with sculpture, process, and performance anticipated the mixing of media that came to dominate art in the second half of the twentieth century. Both artists pushed photography toward abstraction while retaining a “forensic” interest in detail. Surfaces bearing traces are viewed obliquely; a downward tilt of vision turns incidental marks into signs for interpretation. The camera surveys a plane that appears as a code to be deciphered, or a mystery to be solved.

Although its form is quite specific, the applications of this type of image are broad. Indeed it is extraordinary just how often it occurred in the art of the late 1960s and into the 1970s, a period characterized by an interest in traces and evidence. Lewis Baltz’s topographic projects, such as Nevada (1977), for example, pored over details of bulldozed landscapes being converted into suburbs. Larry Sultan and Mike Mandel’s book Evidence (1977) was a comic humiliation of the functional photograph visiting various archives in police departments, fire stations, and industrial laboratories; they removed images from their contextual dozers and left them adrift on white pages. The book’s enigmatic opening shot shows a floor covered in some kind of dust and footstep. Similarly perplexing pictures also found their way into the work of Ed Ruscha, and into the documentation of Land art and performance art, particularly that of Richard Long, Robert Smithson, Ana Mendieta, and Gordon Matta-Clark. In a period of art that is thought to have broken with any notion of “style,” this essentially forensic image form was pervasive.

While these investigations into the evidentiary image were going on, a remote camera landed on the surface of Mars. The art historian Ernst Gombrich saw its first image beamed back to Earth, reproduced in Time magazine. In his 1960 essay “Standards of Truth: The Arrested Image and the Moving Eye,” he suggested:
We cannot really tell the size of the boulders or ridges which are visible on the picture from Mars unless we know their distance, and vice versa, though for proximate objects there may be additional information through such clues as texture or ‘grain’—assuming that we guess correctly at their composition. An arrested image (Gombrich means an optically-derived image) might thus be compared to a single equation with two variables such as r = a / t. We can calculate the size of an object if we know the distance and the distance if we know its size, to know both we would have to have additional information.

One wonders if Gombrich, ever the analyst of realism, was making a drift reversal of the old question of whether photography is transparent enough to be understood by Martians. Although they looked uncannily familiar to many viewers, the Mars images demanded a great deal of specialized knowledge to be understood. Similarly, the views offered by aerial photographs of our own planet may require trained professionals to extract their data. This is one aspect of photography’s complicated relation to abstraction. Today, cameras’ discerning points and other forms of nonfigurative photography are enjoying a revival in art, but such work often misses the unsettling idea that the world itself is essentially abstract. It always demands the imposition of conventions of seeing and the skilled vigilance of interpretation. In the series Per PolumeraM Ad Alta (2007), by the artist Eva Stennar, these two versions of abstraction—figurative and nonfigurative—are subtly compounded. Stennar downloaded from the Internet some of NASA’s 1966 pictures of Mars and converted them into negatives that were then left to gather dust before being printed. The already uncertain landscapes are now seen through puffs of whiteness that could be cosmic—or plain domestic.

Clearly one can trace a line from Stennar’s pictures back to Dust Breeding, but the quiet influence of Mars Ray’s photograph has extended into some unlikely domains as well. In 1977 it was included as a keynote image in the catalog of the New York Museum of Modern Art’s Information, its first major survey show of Conceptual art. Two decades on, it inspired French photographer Sophie Ristelhueber, whose work focuses on traces of war and violence, to make one of the most troubling projects of recent decades. In early 1991 Saddam Hussein’s army of Iraq conscripts was being bombed out of Kuwait. Ristelhueber saw an aerial photograph of the incident, again in Time magazine, which prompted her to visit the Kuwaiti desert herself. It was the ambiguous Dust Breeding that provided the form. In the newspaper Le Monde (September 27–28, 1992), she stated:

By shifting from the air to the ground, I sought to destroy any notion of scale as in Mars Ray and Marcel Duchamp’s Événement de poussière. It’s a picture which fascinates me and which I kept in my mind throughout the time I was working in Kuwait. The constant shift between the infinitely big and the infinitely small may disorient the spectator. But it is a good illustration of our relationship to the world: we have at our disposal modern techniques for seeing everything, apprehending everything, yet we see nothing.

Before turning to photography Ristelhueber studied literature, with a keen interest in the writer Alain Robbe-Grillet, who was stretching literature to the point where description becomes abstract. In Robbe-Grillet’s careful accounts of surfaces, objects, and places, everything is crystal clear, and yet their precise significance is elusive. Rejecting what he called “the archaic myths of depth,” Robbe-Grillet dramatized the tension between fact and meaning. This is from his 1959 novel Dans le labyrinthe/In the Labyrinth.

The fine dust that dulls the shine of the horizontal planes, the varnished tablescape, the polished parquet, the marble of the mausoleum and that of the chest of drawers, the cracked marble of the chest of drawers, the only dust here comes from the room itself from the gaps in the pendant possibly, or from the bed, or the curtains, or the ashes in the fireplace. On the varnished tablescape the dust has marked the place occupied for a while—fit a few hours, a few days, minutes, weeks—by small objects since removed, the boxes of which are clearly outlined for a while longer, a circle, a square, a rectangle, other less simple forms, none of them partly overlapping, already blurred or half erased as by the flick of a rag.

Details simply are. Their value is a matter of human projection. Ristelhueber saw connections this and the camera’s indifferent mode of recording. Titled Fail (meaning both fast and done), her Kuwait project comprises seventy-two color and black-and-white images. In a further play on the enigma of scale, it is exhibited as a monumental grid but published as a modest little book. A final image, left out of the series, stands alone, titled A cause de l’événement de poussière: Because of the dust breeding. This is what we might call the politics of abstraction. Habits of seeing are estranged strategically in the hope of opening up a space to think differently about warfare, about landscape, about photography, about visions. It is a risky strategy, always provisional and contingent upon the cultural norms that are being challenged. How to discuss abstraction as a principle of modern social, industrial, and political life, while avoiding empty formalism? How to address the systemic rationalization of the world’s appearance without turning it into mere pattern? How to “interpret” such imagery without resorting to extrapolation?

So many contemporary landscape photographers walk these lines, from Robert Adams and Richard Misrach to Andreas Gursky and Edward Burtynsky. But it’s not a matter of making politically correct images. The viewer has a responsibility, too, to avoid the easy options of revelling in abstraction for its own sake or denouncing photographers for their lack of engagement. It is a matter of what the musician John Cage, who was also deeply affected by Mars Ray’s dust image, called “response ability.”