Mareike Stoll

The In-Between as a Place of *Poiësis:* Photography of Ambivalence in a Photobook

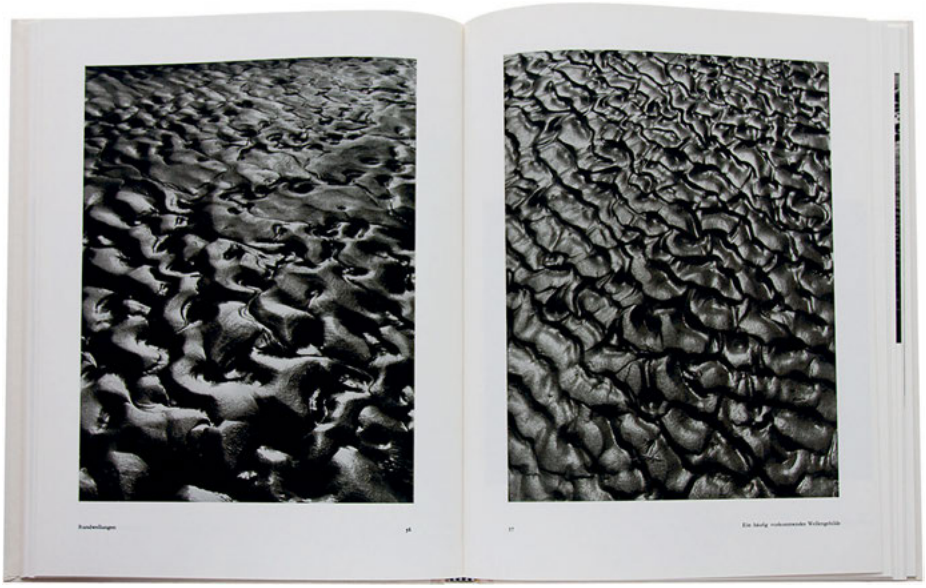

Fig. 1: Alfred Ehrhardt, *Das Watt* (Hamburg: Heinrich Ellermann, 1937), plates 36 and 37.

Sand, sculpted by currents of water and wind, presented in stark contrasts, unusual frames, forming poetic close-ups. Two photographs are positioned next to each other on the double-spread of a book; on the right frame a slither of another photograph shines through from behind. The series continues. The images are accentuated in their verticality by the portrait format but also by the direction of the camera that does not include a horizon line for orientation. On the page, the photos are stabilized visually by captions on the lower right- and left-hand corners respectively, and by the plate numbers ("36" and "37") below the inner edges. The tonality of the photographs' black-and-white nonetheless allows for many shades in between, turning the surface of sand portrayed here into almost tactile landscapes. The close-up studies of sandy surfaces are recognizable as both representational photography *and* abstractions, a fact that gives them their interpretative and poetic richness. Rewarding our close reading with a more nuanced understanding of the morphology of sand formations, they give us an idea of what granular material looks like in photography. They are, above all else, surfaces that provoke tactility, printed photographs in a book. Published in

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1937, *Das Watt* (in English this translates to "mudflat") collects ninety-six images that resist any quick interpretation with their opaque photographic, aesthetic surfaces. Celebrating this simultaneity of surface *and* landscape, insinuated relief *and* actual flatness of the page, they are *Kippfiguren*, symbolic material of the region that they capture: the mudflats are both land and sea, constantly in flux between ebb and flow. The landscape evoked by the title is broken into fragments of a landscape, or unstable grounds, by the hands of the beholder who is activating the image sequence of the book.

Das Watt is a photobook, a medium that emerged around 1924 in the German context of avant-garde bookmaking, the newspaper industry, and the growing visual as well as political importance and ubiquity of photography.[1] In a photobook, images enter into an epistemological inquiry about the potential of photography as medium and material, and as a way to construct our perception of any given point of view. In the following, I will briefly sketch out the characteristics of the photobook in relation to ambiguity, and spend time unpacking the notion of the in-between, before focusing on the page of the book that becomes wall-like in the case of the peculiar images that *Das Watt* offers, which hover between representation and abstraction. The text closes with reflections on the relationship of the book and the body of the beholder and the space in between that opens up, and how it might relate to agency and an invitation to step inside the book, to engage with images.

Photography in Flux

A photobook contains very little text and combines photographic images in a sequence, with a particular focus on the in-between. By "in-between" I refer to the space between the photographs within the sequence, the space between all the (visual, tactile, invisible) elements of which the book is composed, between two photos juxtaposed on a double-page, but also to the correspondence and visually rich murmur of connotations, associations, and meanings that comes into existence in this space.[2] Understanding the

1 Some of the most iconic German photobooks were published over the course of three years: between 1928 and 1930. August Sander's *Antlitz der Zeit*, Karl Blossfeldt's *Urformen der Kunst*, Albert Renger-Patzsch's *Die Welt ist schön* and Germaine Krull's *Métal* were all published in 1928 and 1929; as was the groundbreaking publication accompanying the *Film und Foto* exhibition in Stuttgart (the catalogue was called *Foto-Auge*). László Moholy-Nagy's *60 Fotos* and Aenne Biermann's publication of the same series both appeared in 1930.

2 At the end of the Weimar Republic, photography as a medium and as material was debated as simultaneously holding the key to a better future of human-kind (the hygiene of the optical, as László Moholy-Nagy put it) as well as being an instrument in manipulation, corruptibility and propaganda (this position was argued by Walter Benjamin, Siegfried Kracauer, and Aby Warburg, among others). In this discourse of what photography as a form of knowledge can offer, the medium of the photobook was recognized as an important instrument to knowledge acquisition. In my previous research I have called attention to the pedagogical program of visual literacy that many publications ascribed to. See Mareike

page of the book as site and stage where words and images form dynamic constellations of epistemological inquiry, I wish to explore questions relating to the human body, imagination, creativity, agency, and resonance. Photobooks are tangible things that need to be held; only by leafing through them does the sequence of pictures unfold.[3] The material support immediately starts interacting with hand and body, eyes and mind of the beholder when the book is picked up. This also means that any photobook is a collaborative medium. They are not necessarily published as such—most often we find one author and a title on the cover; sometimes there is a mention of the editor in the imprint and not everyone involved in the process is named, but often we do not know who was responsible for the layout and graphic design of the books published in the 1920s—but they were conceived between various collaborative instances, as any book is, still to this day: they are part of a dialogue of inspiration and creation, of a back-and-forth between agents, materials, and everything in between.[4] Much of the work, experience, and design knowledge going into the photobook is invisible to the untrained eye. That is why I want to locate this knowledge (and indeed activity) in the space of the in-between. There, we have space to breathe, and listen, truly listen, to the material, the things at hand: this is where we co-create in an open-ended conversation.[5]

This space in between is unstable and messy, perhaps, but an urgent depository of activity that is contagious in the best of ways.[6] The hands of the beholder are essential, as they connect the practice of making (the knowledge of the designer and photographer) that is often silent, taciturn, to the knowledge of letters and the pictorial shape that the book as a medium is tied to; together they create a way of knowing. Investigating the relation of words and images by way of resistances, frictions, as much as associations and correspondences, I wish to place the act of engaging with this productive activity in the hands of the beholders.

Das Watt by photographer Alfred Ehrhardt (1901–1984) presents photographs taken on many extended walks on the coast of northern Germany, close to the city of Cuxhaven, in the area that is defined by the tide, where ebb and flow dominate. Ehrhardt had been teaching abstract painting in the 1920s and the beginning of the 1930s.

Stoll, *Schools for Seeing: German Photobooks between 1924 and 1937 as Perception Primers and Sites of Knowledge*, PhD diss. (Princeton University, 2015).

3 By "unfolding" I am referring to an idea formulated by Walter Benjamin in his essay on Franz Kafka's writing, describing that his texts unfold similar to the bud of rose, not like a piece of paper, but rather expanding, "bringing forth" complexity and layers of meaning: this is what *poiësis* is to me.

4 The photobook is designed to become a machine that helps slow-read photography; it underscores the relevance of hands in the process of understanding the material by grasping it (*begreifen*).

5 Instead of the hylomorphic model and object–subject binary, I use concepts of agency and things, inspired by Tim Ingold's writings. See Tim Ingold, "Textility of Making," *Cambridge Journal of Economics* 34 (2010): 91–102.

6 See Georges Didi-Huberman, *Atlas: How to Carry the World on One's Back?* (Karlsruhe: ZKM, 2010); see Horst Bredekamp, "A Neglected Tradition? Art History as Bildwissenschaft," *Critical Inquiry* 29, no. 3 (2003): 418–28.

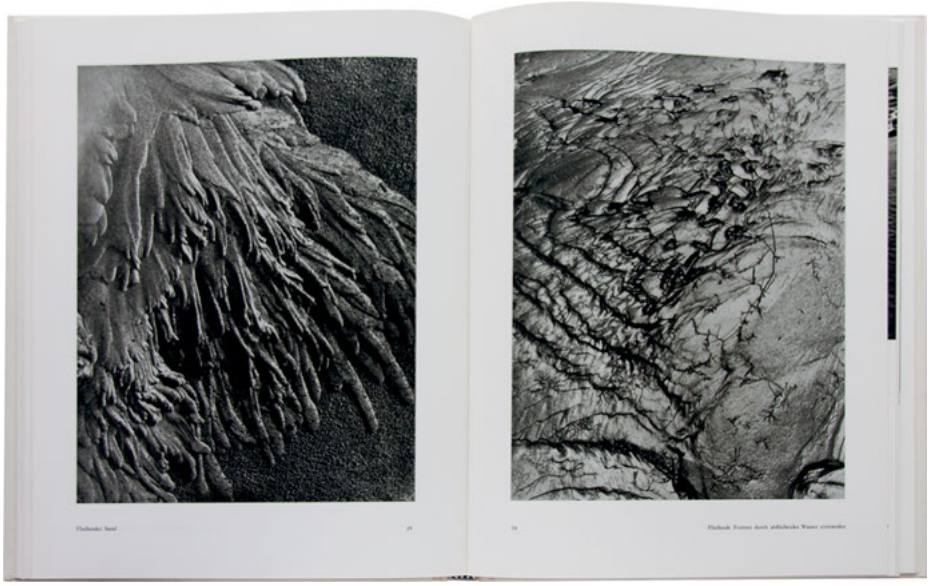

Fig. 2: Ehrhardt, *Das Watt*, plates 58 and 59.

Forced by the Nazis to give up teaching in 1933, Ehrhardt also completely abandoned painting and picked up the camera instead, which for him offered new ways to combine abstraction with representation.[7] In my reading, the photographs examine the sandy ground they aesthetically portray as shifting: the book is about orientation as much as it is about context. No grounds were neutral at the time, not least the term or concept "ground" itself—*Boden* of course was part of Nazi propaganda.[8] In 1937, the year of publication of *Das Watt*, the Nazis organized the exhibition *Entartete Kunst* (Degenerate Art) in Munich, which attacked abstract modernist painting and art as "degenerate."[9]

Already in the 1920s, the medium of the photobook had been tied to contemporary forms of perception and, broadly speaking, to the discourse of modernity and urbanization in relation to subjectivity and a discussion of "nature versus culture," which are

7 For more on Ehrhardt, see Christiane Stahl, *Alfred Ehrhardt: Naturphilosoph mit der Kamera: Fotografien 1933–1947* (Berlin: Dietrich Reimer Verlag, 2007).

8 Tied to this notion of space as "Lebensraum" with the connotations of home or "Heimat," the photographic portrait in particular is a genre that in Nazi Germany becomes more and more politicized. See mostly the work of photographers Erna Lendvai-Dircksen, Leni Riefenstahl, and Dr. Paul Wolff, for portraits depicting the phantasm of the "Aryan race" as connected to space, landscape, and environment.

9 See Franz Roh, *"Entartete" Kunst, Kunstbarbarei im Dritten Reich* (Hannover: Fackelträger Verlag, 1962). More recently Anson Rabinbach and Sander L. Gilman, ed., *The Third Reich Sourcebook* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 483524, and Olaf Peters, ed., *Degenerate Art: The Attack on Modern Art in Nazi Germany, 1937*, exh. cat. Neue Galerie New York (Munich: Prestel, 2014).

also present in the book at hand.[10] German photobooks in 1937 are, however, embedded in a radically different context. The concept of "landscape" in relation to photography needs to be read against this backdrop, paying close attention to the surface depicted as simultaneously fluid and fixed. By celebrating ambiguity visually, *Das Watt* makes the beholder an accomplice in ambivalence.

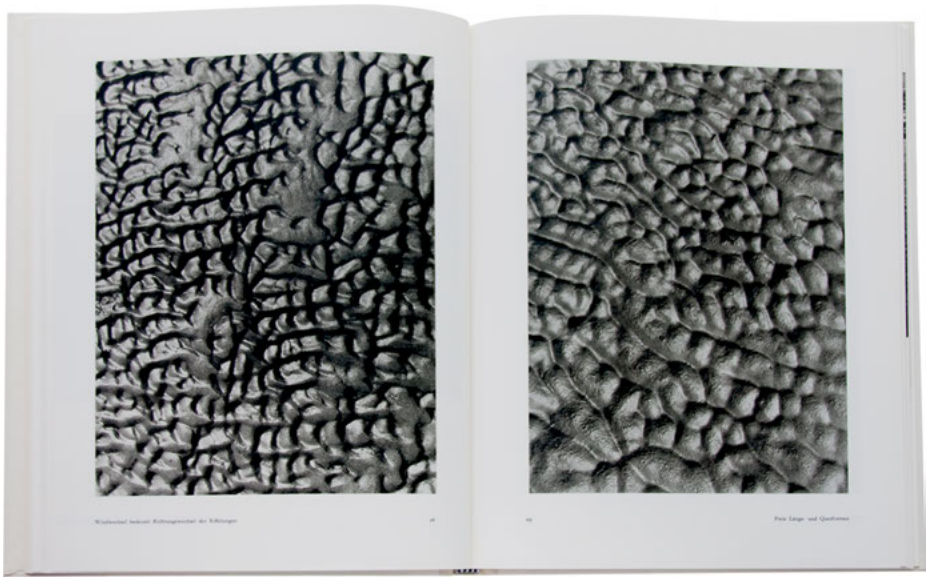

Fig. 3: Ehrhardt, *Das Watt*, plates 28 and 29.

Ehrhardt pointed the camera to his feet, so to speak, to photograph details of the ground. Landscapes are usually defined by format and by inclusion of a visual marker that we find in the horizon. If this is missing, if the familiar becomes unfamiliar by omitting the horizon, how can we make sense of what we see? The photographs thus shift our point of view—with regards to landscape and to abstraction but also to orientation. Where do we stand, metaphorically speaking? Because photobooks always establish a bodily connection as a material thing, I argue that they become a thinking device that is tied to the grasping of photography's intriguing complexity by the hand. The book deliberately employs photography in relation to landscape and abstraction to destabilize notions of regional belonging; it thus transfers the question of agency and taking a stand, the question of orientation and point of view, to us as the beholders. Re-examining *Das Watt* in the context of the Cluster of Excellence "Matters of Activity" allows us to understand this destabilization as de-passivation, as indeed the activity is within the "material" of photography and in the medium of the photobook.

10 For more on this see Daniel H. Magilow, *The Photography of Crisis: The Photo Essays of the Weimar Republic* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2012), 63–64.

With regard to photographer Albert Renger-Patzsch, already in 1931 Walter Benjamin had called the failure to acknowledge the connective tissue of human involvement ("menschliche Zusammenhänge") in photography the very "corruptibility" of the medium.[11] Photography, in other words, allows us to forget that we are always-already part of what we look at: we are implicated by reading it, making sense of it by having to reconstruct what is invisible, what lies beyond the photograph and forms the connective tissue to political dimensions as well. In this context, my effort is to expand Benjamin's claim to the realm of nationalist *Blut-und-Boden* photography in the 1930s. *Das Watt* calls attention to the construction of a landscape that is always also to be understood in terms of claims of belonging, of inclusion and exclusion on the grounds of arguments that are visually enforced. As a consequence, the corruptibility and ambiguity of photography both come to the fore in the book, literally changing the grounds our perception is based on. With the means of the photobook horizontality and verticality become mobile, making the beholder of the book an active part in the reassembly of the arguments the ground is based on.[12] This is achieved most pronouncedly through the sequence of the photographs that are carefully choreographed in order to deconstruct any stable reading. At a time when any depiction and representation of landscape in Germany is always-already political, this book offers a sequence of images that goes back and forth between images of abstraction (fig. 4): images of a horizon line, sky and ground, and perspectival images without a horizon but clear indications of space (e.g., the cover image). The book's sequence underscores this movement. Throughout the choreographed series, the direction of a gaze might as convincingly be a "looking away," as it might be a "focusing on."[13] It is both at the same time, yet neither completely. The book is also in this sense ambivalent, every photograph in this book is a *Kippfigur*.[14]

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11 See also Mareike Stoll, "Menschenleer: Der Tatort in Benjamins Schriften zur Photographie," in *Walter Benjamin und die Anthropologie*, ed. Carolin Duttlinger, Ben Morgan, and Anthony Phelan (Freiburg, Berlin, and Vienna: Rombach, 2012), 343–62; Walter Benjamin, "Kleine Geschichte der Photographie [1931]," in *Gesammelte Schriften I.1*, ed. Hermann Schweppenhäuser and Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1991).

12 The photographic portrait in particular is a genre that becomes more and more politicized. See mostly: Erna Lendvai-Dircksen, Leni Riefenstahl, and Dr. Paul Wolff for portraits depicting the phantasm of the "Aryan race."

13 For the political implications of a "looking away," see Rei Terada, *Looking Away: Phenomenality and Dissatisfaction: Kant to Adorno* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).

14 At a time when the depiction of a coastal landscape usually meant a horizon line, Ehrhardt has to be compared to those photographers who depicted seascapes like that. See most prominently Paul Wolff's summer-vacation book from around the same time that depicts this landscape in a very different way. Dr. Paul Wolff, *Sonne über See und Strand: Ferienfahrten mit der Leica: Text und 112 Tiefdruckbilder: Mit einem Schlussbeitrag von H. Windisch* (Frankfurt: Bechhold Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1936). Norderney, where the photos are taken, was advertised in the book as tourist destination, and the local office of tourism was proud to proclaim that it was "German" (which meant banned for Jews, or "judenfrei"). See Lisa Andryszak and Christine Bramkamp, ed., *Jüdisches Leben auf Norderney: Präsenz, Vielfalt und Ausgrenzung* (Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2014) 173–74.

Fig. 4: Ehrhardt, *Das Watt*, plates 60 and 61.

The most abstract double-pages in the book indeed tilt the ground to be represented in such a way that they become wall-like. Photographed by pointing the camera to the ground (and not, like you would expect, oriented toward the horizon), this spread resembles an exhibition wall, showcasing the tilting of the ground upward to an absolute verticality, and to abstraction. Ehrhardt effectively uses the mobilizing elements of the photobook in order to produce the shock of the impenetrable photographic surface, exhibiting abstraction, no less. Ehrhardt's abstract photographs can be related to the internalization and representation of the wall in terms of their verticality.[15] Folded into this destabilization is the potential for a crisis and thus for the material to enlighten, to move us to think critically. When we step out of the passive consumption into an "engaging with," we are acknowledging our agency in the processing of information and in knowledge creation.[16] What is missing from what we see, especially with the photography of sand on a coastline in Germany in 1937? This is the question of context, and of societal, even political connective tissue. Only when we take into account the implied and the invisible does the "bigger picture" come into view with all its messy, urgent, and complicated dimensions.

15 For an intriguingly complex, profound, and philosophical investigation of ground with regards to drawing see artist Riet Eeckhout (*1975), especially her *Uncommon Ground.*

16 Roland Barthes, *Wie zusammen leben*, ed. Éric Marty, trans. Horst Brühmann (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2007), 213, where he speaks of the etymological connection of critique and crisis: the purpose of (literary) critic/critique lies in provoking a crisis.

The Book as Stage "Where Everything Shifts at Every Step"

Das Watt was distributed by Heinrich Ellermann, a publisher based in Hamburg, specializing in photography books and poetry, but also children's books.[17] This might not be a coincidence, because children's books, too, are complex constellations of words and images, offering sites of epistemological inquiry, that is, as well as schools for seeing and literacy using the space of the in-between. *Das Watt* works with such an activated space between the photographs. What was at stake and still is to this day is the challenge to learn to fully understand photography and image constellations in their complexity. Because much of it is invisible and happens in the "in-between," it can only be understood through analysis and a taking-apart, only by considering *con*texts, *para*texts, *inter*texts, and wider cultural connotations. Avant-garde book-making experiments from the 1920s, as well as photobooks and children's book from this period have revolutionized what they referred to as "book space."[18] Indeed, it is in the concept of the "in-between" that the simultaneity of page and "stage" unfolds as "architecture" that invites the beholder to step inside. This essay is thus posited at the threshold of two research projects, both dealing with in-between as place for *poeisis*, saturated with activity.

It was Walter Benjamin who in 1926 wrote about an observation that is most fitting in this context. He noted that the child who is focused on reading and looking at a picture book is often so fully immersed in the story unfolding before them, that they enter the book as if it were a stage. The book is not a thing anymore to the child, but the child understands it as its environment and establishes a dialogical relationship with it where both the child and the book (and indeed all the elements in between) act and interact to co-create the experience of reading, the unfolding of the story in the book space.

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17 Roland Jaeger, "Ennoch und Ellermann: Zwei deutsche Fotobuchverlage der zwanziger und dreißiger Jahre," *Photonews* (Thema Photobuch, 05/2008): 4–5, where Roland Jaeger makes mention of the publisher of Gebrüder Enoch Verlag, Kurt Enoch, and his publishing house that he was forced to sell to "Aryan" owners. Enoch emigrated from Germany to Paris and in 1940 to the United States. Until 1936, the young publishing house Ellermann Verlag had mostly published poetry that was not National Socialist. Trying their hand at the new medium of the photobook, publisher Heinrich Ellermann and his team printed the project with exceptional attention to the range of gray in the photographic reproductions. To this day, Ellermann Verlag publishes children's picture books.

18 El Lissitzky argued that the book-space is made of content as much as form, layout design, and script-image, as much as the arguments and ideas. In July 1923, eight theses on New Typography ("Topographie der Typographie") by Lissitzky were published in *Merz*, no. 4. (cited in Andrea Nelson, "László Moholy-Nagy and Painting Photography Film: A Guide to Narrative Montage," *History of Photography* 30, no. 3 (2006): 258–69, 260).

> Nicht die Dinge treten dem bildernden Kind aus den Seiten heraus—im Schauen dringt es selber als Gewölk, das mit dem Farbenglanz der Bilder sich sättigt, in sie hinein. [Das Kind] meistert die Trugwand der Fläche und zwischen farbigen Geweben, bunten Verschlägen betritt es eine Bühne, wo das Märchen lebt. . . . In solch farbenbehängte, undichte Welt, wo bei jedem Schritt sich alles verschiebt, wird das Kind als Mitspieler aufgenommen.[19]

Benjamin surprisingly turns the tables on us, because we might be expecting the characters to become alive and step out of the book to interact with us. Instead, the child as the beholder enters the book as if it were a stage and there, it finds the content of the images as transformative nourishment (the child feeds on the colors as it is saturated by them—*sättigen* means both). It is a stage that, through play and interaction, facilitates confidence-building, even empowerment. The child is allowed to interact and play as an equal in this world of the book, to act responsibly, "where everything shifts at every step," as Benjamin writes, speaking as if looking at Ehrhardt's photographs.

Das Watt pays attention to the act of construction of perception, while the ground depicted begins to shift from horizontal to vertical and back again. The images engulf us like walls, or allow us to tread on fluid sand (figs. 3 and 4, respectively). Akin to children's picture books or ABC books used in school, photobooks were meant to alphabetize their readers in the language of photography. But they also appeal, like any art worthy of this name, to a greater endeavor: to the orientation within the complex web of meanings that images and photography as medium and material, as thinking devices and practices, and as ubiquitous elements that our environment always encompasses. I want to propose that—in these series of crises that we are facing—we need a space of the in-between, of the ambivalent that at the same time encourages us to become agents in responsible interactions. "The child is accepted/taken in as a fellow actor," Benjamin writes (*wird als Mitspieler aufgenommen*), and the German word *aufnehmen* indeed also means to grasp and absorb, but also to responsibly interact with, and to admit, in the sense of respectfully allowing to "become part of." This activation, becoming, transformation is to be taken literally, not only through nourishment, as Benjamin suggests, but by way of associations, correspondences, and frictions of words and images in our imagination when we become part of the material. This notion of inclusion into the material acknowledges the in-between as a place where knowledge acquisition —and, hence, a transformation—occurs, because we handle the books and immerse ourselves in them, let ourselves be engulfed by them. Beholder, material, and the in-between are part of this transformation toward a change in perspective, and, possibly, also in behavior, understood as handling and acting, *Handeln*, in a world that simulta-

19 Walter Benjamin, "Aussicht ins Kinderbuch [1926]," *Gesammelte Schriften IV.2*, ed. Tillman Rexroth (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1991), 609. "It is not the things that emerge from the pages for the child who creates the pictures (image-ing)—in looking, they themselves penetrate these pages as a cloud that saturates/nourishes itself with the glow of the colors of the pictures. [The child] masters the illusory wall of the surface and between colorful fabrics, colorful hutches they enter a stage where the fairy tale lives. . . . In such colorful, leaky world, where everything shifts at every step, the child is taken in as a fellow actor/player." Translation by the author.

neously demands resilience, empathy, *and* a compass for what matters when it comes to acting responsibly and humane.

The legacy of avant-garde photobooks, and Ehrhardt's book especially, is exemplary in this regard. It lies in its posed questions of agency and how the material and the beholder, how what we see and our construction of it in our minds are related through our hands, how our bodies are implied in our grasping and holding of photographic images. *Das Watt* offers a training manual in orientation in ambivalent constellations, also, and this is important, because it becomes a thinking device, metaphorically speaking. The in-between in this book is one that solemnly embraces ambiguity. As Benjamin reminds us, the imagination of the child allows for everything to be in flux, and it is decidedly a joyful place, because it has agency and is allowed to play as an equal. Perhaps the takeaway is this: precisely in this capacity to tolerate ambiguity and to enjoy the grounds of interpretation as shifting and in flux, we can more confidently approach this complex world that also lies beyond the book, and accept our responsibility in co-creating instead of being overwhelmed and confused. Researchers in psychology and neuroscience have referred to this capacity to tolerate nuanced shades of gray between black and white as "integrative complexity."[20] It denotes the capacity to simultaneously accept two seemingly contradictory truths as possible and legitimate from different standpoints while still holding on to one's agency and a clear compass for right and wrong. This is the prerequisite for both empathy and diplomacy, so desperately needed in times of crisis and polarized societies. By entering into the book, by acknowledging that in the in-between there is agency, we can perhaps "master the illusory wall of the surface" that Benjamin speaks of, and go on to find out what lies beyond.

Notes:

This text is based in part on arguments developed in my *ABC der Photographie: Photobücher der Weimarer Republik als Schulen des Sehens* (ABC of Photography: Photobooks of the Weimar Republic as Schools for Seeing) (Cologne: Walther König, 2018). I thank Horst Bredekamp for invaluable comments on an earlier version presented at the Annual Conference "Tipping Points: Plastic, Contingent and Unstable Matters" and for allowing me to discover El Lissitzky's designs of children's picture books along the way.

20 Vera Békés and Peter Suedfeld, "Integrative Complexity," in *Encyclopedia of Personality and Individual Differences*, ed. Virgil Zeigler-Hill and Todd K. Shackelford (Heidelberg: Springer, 2019); Peter Suedfeld and Philip Tetlock, "Integrative Complexity of Communications in International Crises," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 21 (1977): 169–84.