

Water versus land

Water¹³

(The idea that) chaos lurks in watery depths.

Chaos, a cauldron full of seething expectations.

Chaos, the mirage of a pole dancer.

The mind needs monsters.

Water's transformative characteristics:

heat and cold, freeze and thaw.

Water is central.

Water models and technologies.

The creative act of water.

The relationship to water.

Domesticating water.

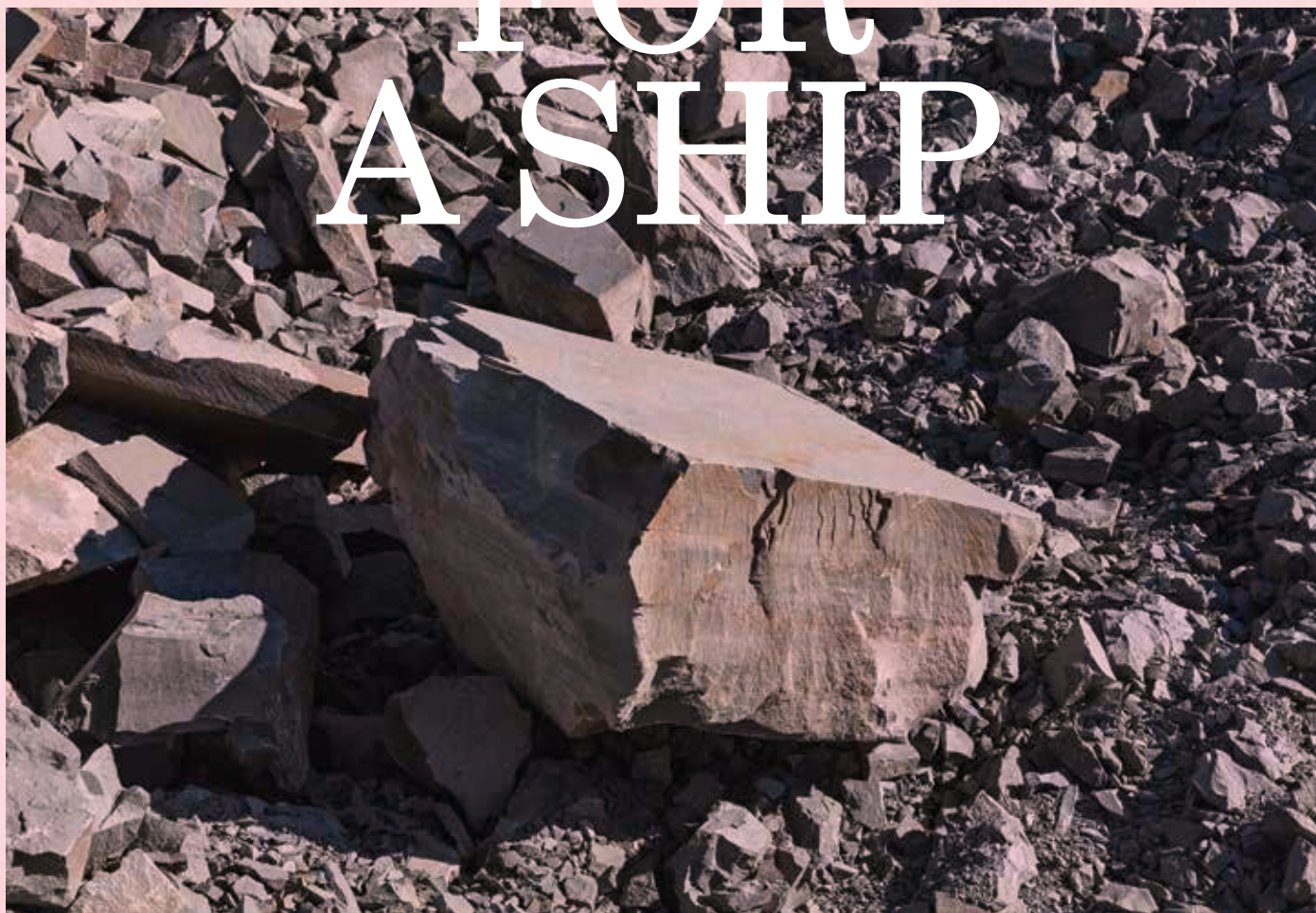
Control over the water.

The aesthetics of water.

Water flows through the world, enabling life and death.

Water, water, water.

I WENT LOOKING FOR A SHIP



Natascha Libbert
I went looking for a ship

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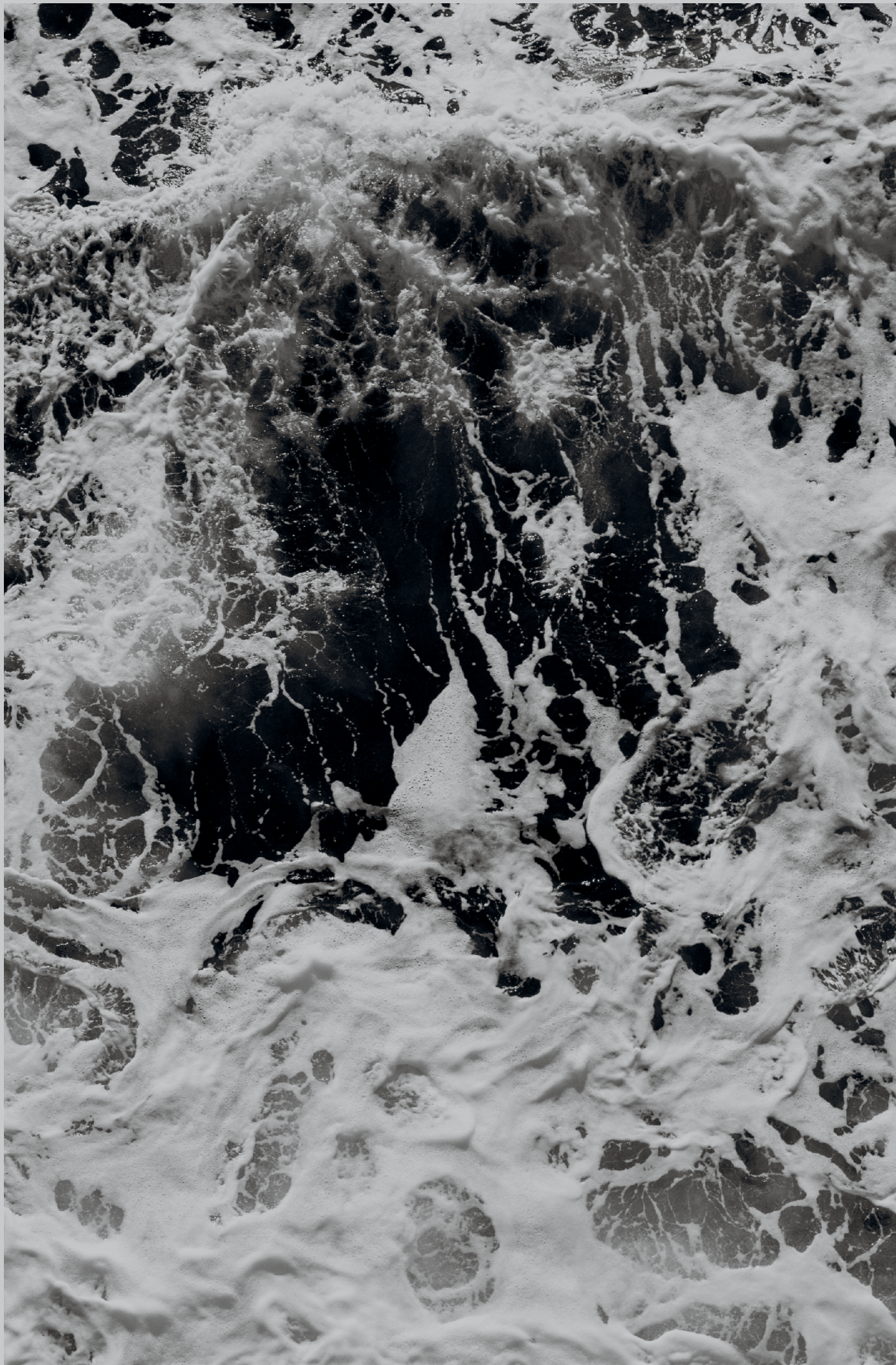
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Introduction

In 1865 labourers started to dig the first channel in the Breesaap, a broad stretch of 'watery land' on the coast of what is now IJmuiden. Eleven years later, a canal connected the port of Amsterdam to the sea and the world beyond. They built three sea locks in succession: the South Lock in 1876, the Middle Lock in 1896 and the North Lock in 1929. Each of them was deemed big enough to last a century, but none of them were. Between 2016 and 2022, workers are constructing a new and larger sea lock, the biggest in the world, to consolidate the position of the Port of Amsterdam.

The Germans occupied this island of sea locks during the Second World War. Now it has been taken over by contractors. More and more men wearing fluorescent jackets arrive by the week. Some 400 people will soon work here.

Logbook, 22 March 2016

While undergoing redevelopment, the engineering landscape of the island is a site of destruction and construction. It is during this period of activity that I have been taking photographs. Workers relocate fauna, test the soil for signs of pollution and unexploded bombs, erect fences of transparent mesh, and analyse conditions below the waterline. Before the new monument rises up, the old one must be demolished and removed.

'Do new monuments cause us to remember the old ones?'¹ Public space disappears and new landscapes appear every week. A whole history lies buried just beneath the surface, and long-lost bunkers are rediscovered. Every day, divers descend into the watery depths to slowly scan the seabed, groping in the dimness for bombs dropped by the Allies in this hidden landscape beyond our reach. Nobody sees what happens beneath the water surface.

Joseph Schumpeter describes in 'Schumpeter's Gale' the mechanisms of industry as 'the process of industrial mutation that incessantly revolutionizes the economic structure from within, incessantly destroying the old one, incessantly creating a new one.'²

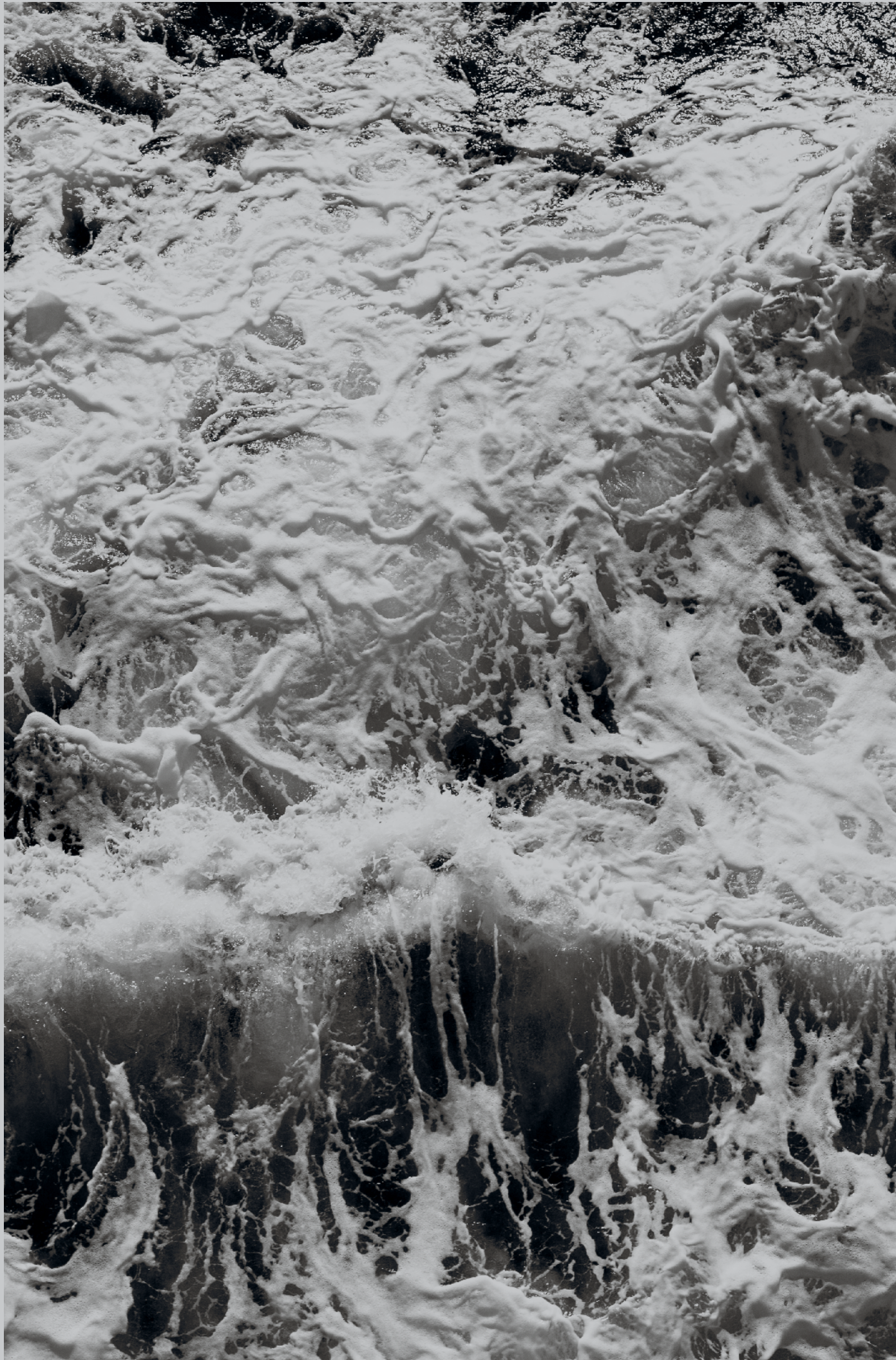
I knew nothing about locks when in late 2015 the Province of North Holland and the North Holland Archive commissioned me to document the reconstruction of the locks at IJmuiden. I did recall watching a television programme about container ships on the Discovery Channel, years ago when lying awake in faraway hotels. And I welcomed this

opportunity to explore an unfamiliar world and document a maritime project.

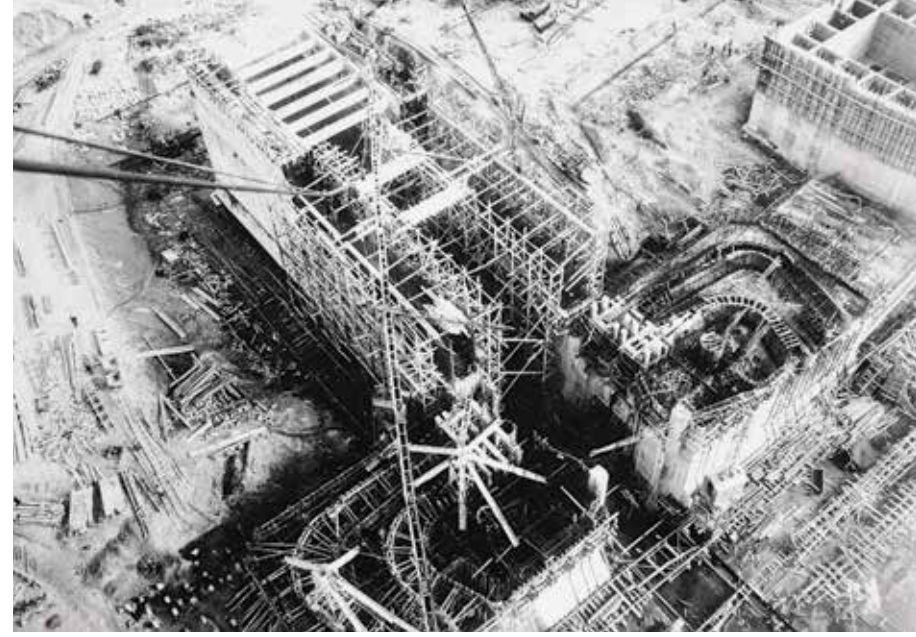
Despite my curiosity, however, I had little affinity with IJmuiden and its sea locks, or even the port of Amsterdam, which is so close to the city where I live. Indeed, I knew almost nothing about the place at all. That meant I could not build on any existing relationship with the area, in the way I usually worked. On top of that, the island offered little that you could call public space. Everything was screened off with fences, with more fences appearing by the week in preparation for the reconstruction work. This compelled me to conduct more specific research and meet with ecologists, divers, officials from the ministry responsible for transport and infrastructure, boatmen on tugs and mooring launches, contractors, bomb experts, archaeologists, lock attendants and staff from the port of Amsterdam, exploring with each of them another aspect of the area and spending as much time as possible inside rather than outside the fences.

I collected anecdotes and images, studied the shipping industry, and wondered what story I wanted to tell. Should I show the practical progress of redevelopment? Did I want to focus on the disappearance of land, the Anthropocene, the size and scale of things, the effects of the global economy, the 'temporary nature' programme in the port, the role of the locks during the Second World War? For all these strands interconnect here. All the while, I was desperately searching for a personal angle on the subject, something more intuitive that I could connect with and make my own. At the same time, everything I photographed disappeared shortly after I had done so, whether on the island or elsewhere in the port. This made it difficult to grab hold of the subject or study anything for any length of time. The transformation of everything around me was incessant.

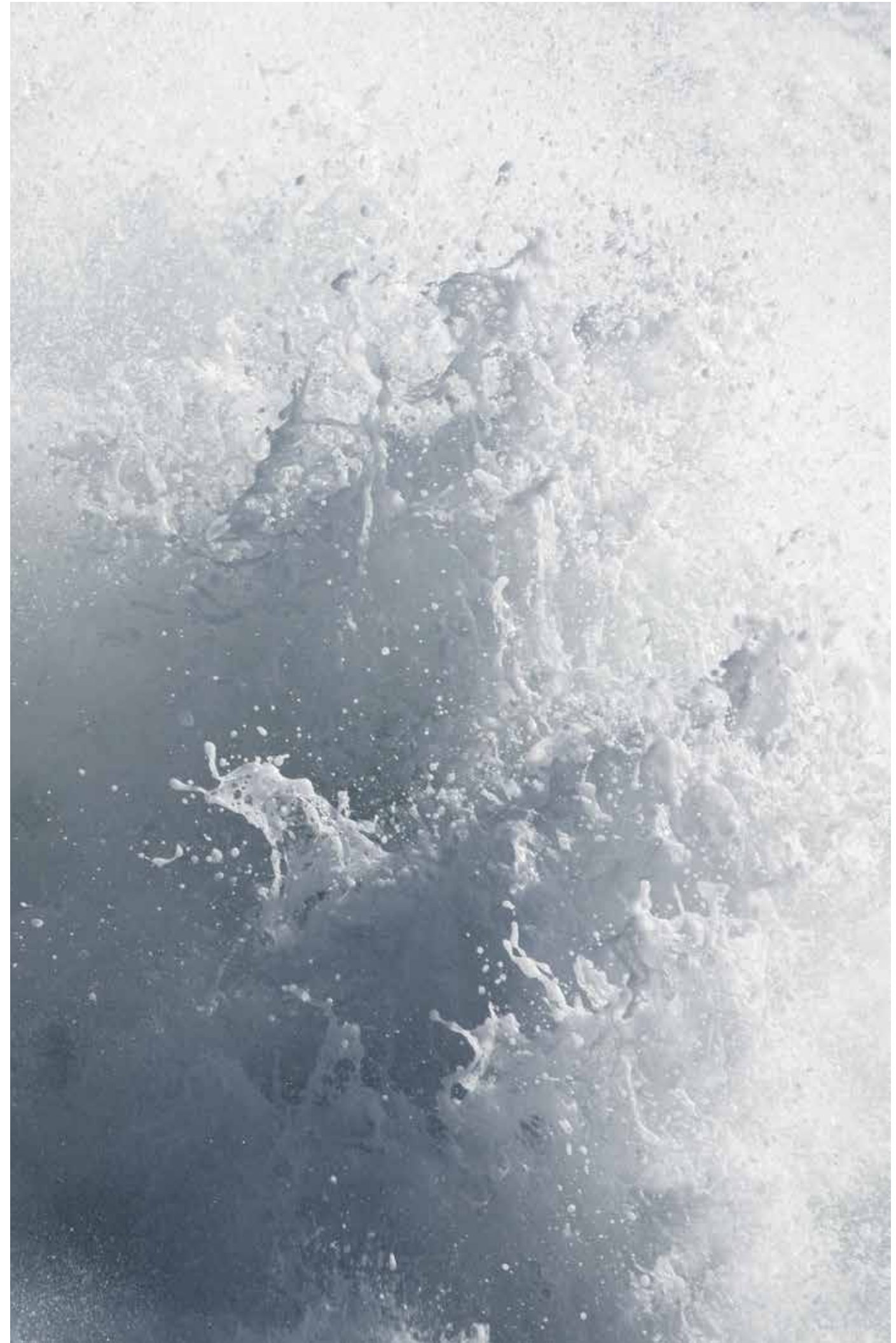
One day, partly out of frustration, I decided I needed to board the ships passing through the locks. I tracked down the maritime pilots who navigate vessels in and out of port and joined them. As I climbed a ladder up the hull to board my first ship out at sea, I felt liberated from the restrictions imposed by land. My view now was from far above, from these superstructures. My view of the landscape and seascape around me gave me insight and the prospect of adventure, and brought me into contact with foreign crews and their life at sea. My focus was no longer confined to the locks, but broadened to include the movement they facilitated to and from a wider world. In the process, I was drifting ever further from my original commission. My subject had become too broad, and the form of storytelling deviated

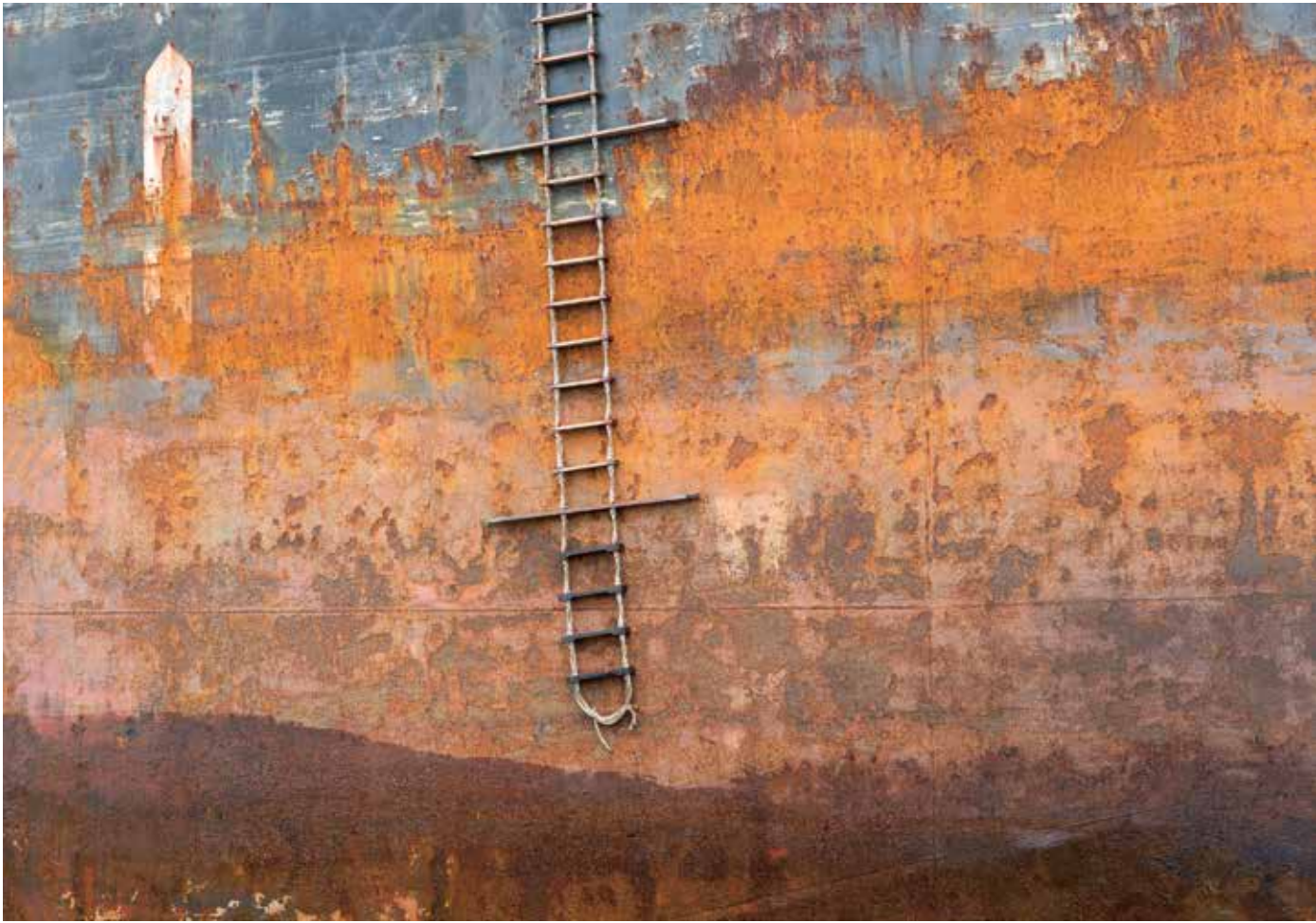


Archive images of construction of North Sea Lock. Courtesy Joop Muller.
North Lock door chamber, approximately 1926. <https://beeldbank.rws.nl>



1876
1896
1929
2022





‘The romance of the sea’ The pilot is guidance
 ... the lock guide ... the waterscape guide ...
 Destruction, construction, transition, tradition, landscape.
 What is remembered through tradition and what is forgotten?





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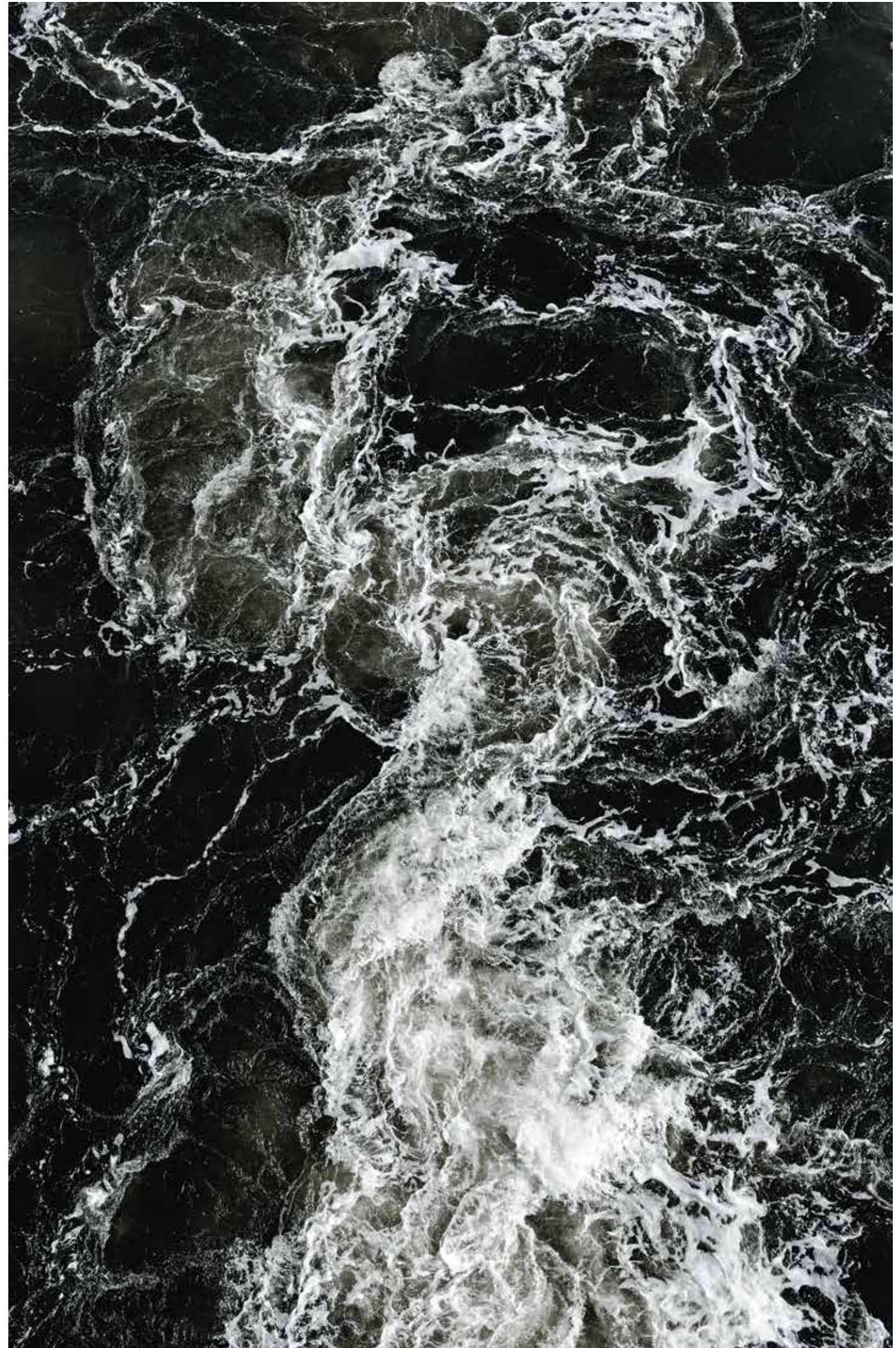






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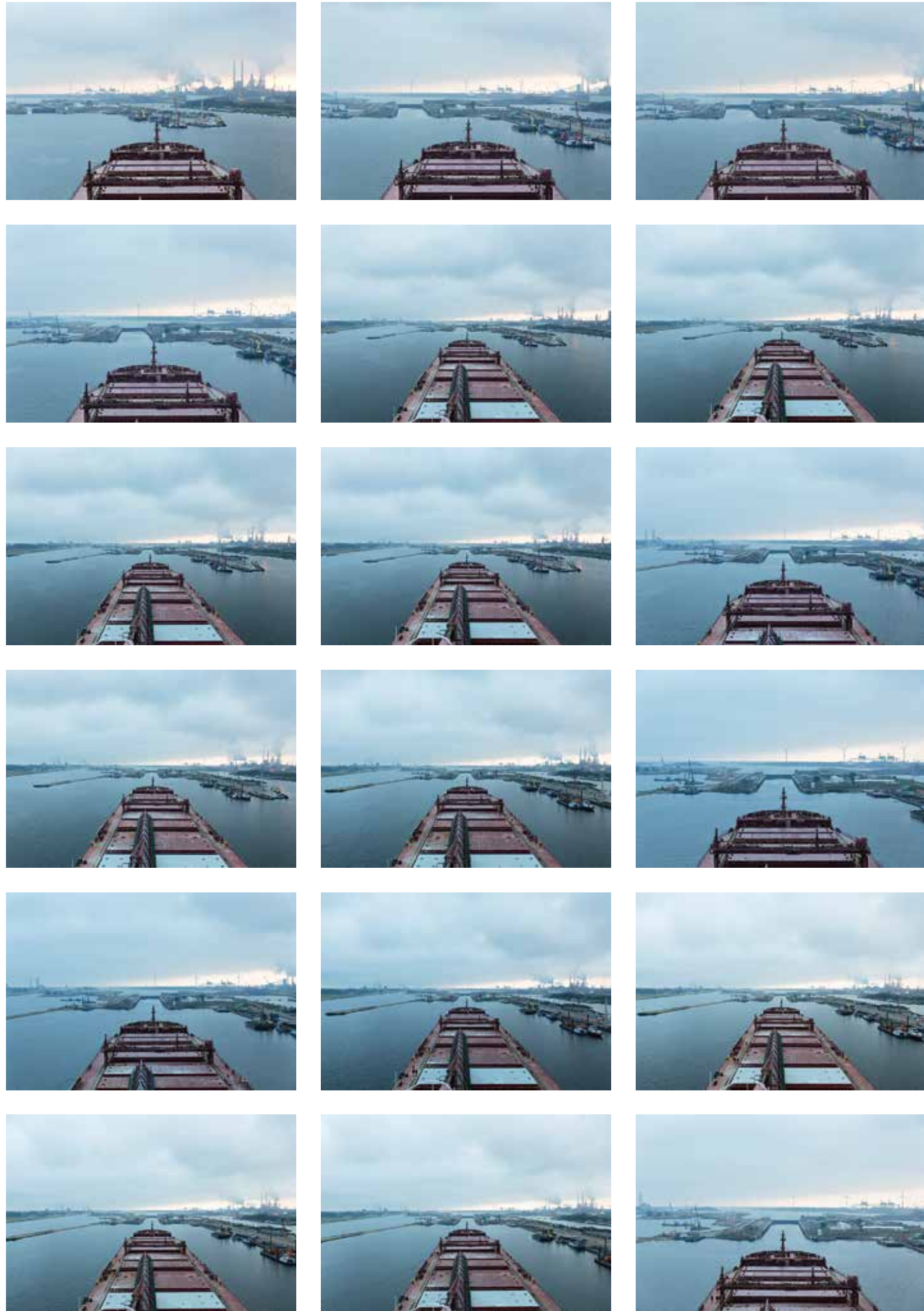




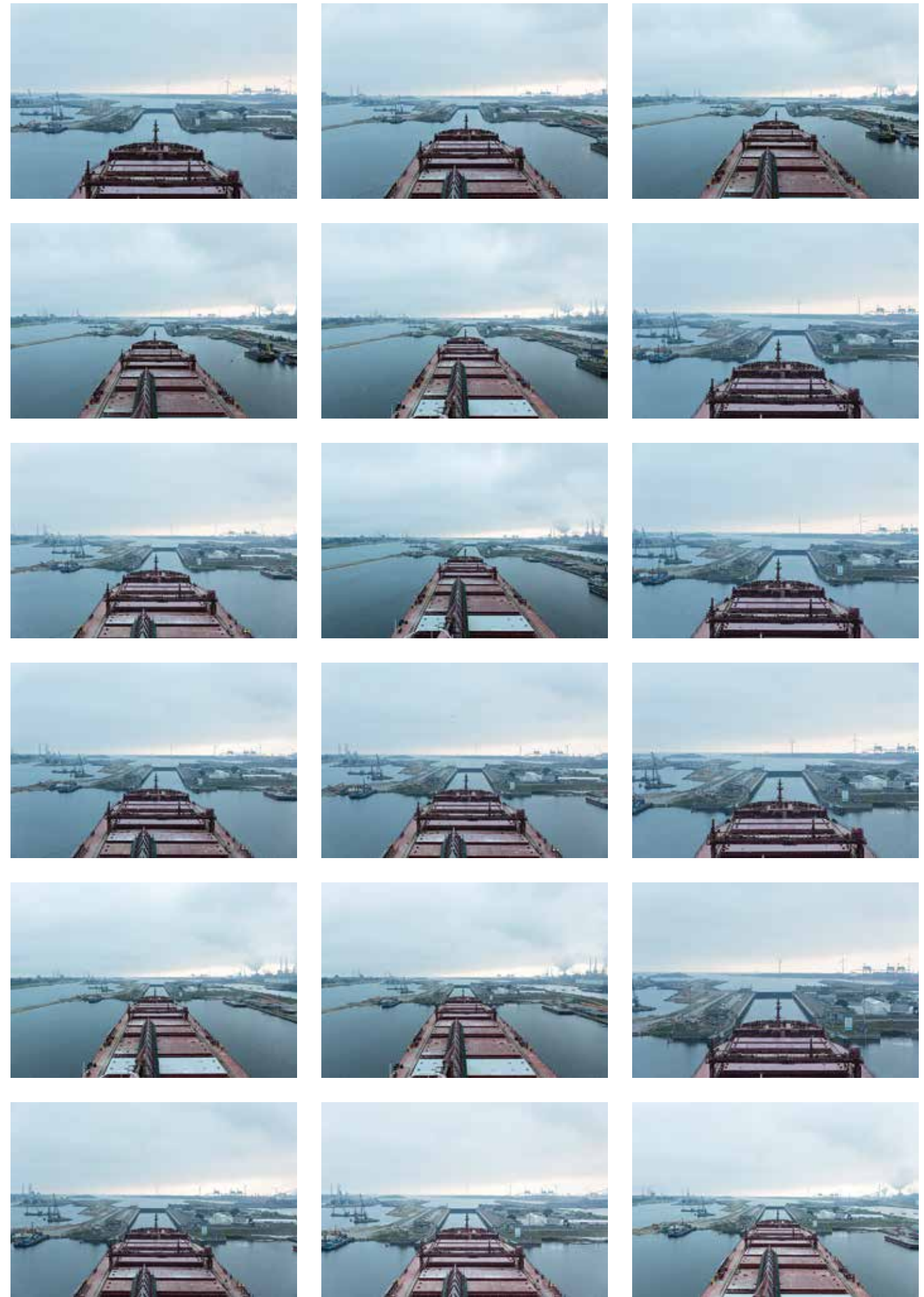


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20:27:14	20:27:59	20:28:38	20:29:38	20:30:01	20:30:37	20:30:53	20:31:53	20:32:12	20:32:49	20:33:30	20:33:46
20:27:27	20:28:17	20:28:41	20:29:43	20:30:07	20:30:42	20:30:55	20:31:58	20:32:14	20:32:52	20:33:33	20:33:54



(093)







Logbook

January 29

The beginning. I stretch. I walk in the dunes. I descend into the locks. I climb ropes and ladders at sea. I am doing research, like a true explorer. I reach places with my photographs and hear stories untold. That night, I dream of a flying container ship. Swinging from a rope, I let my feet dangle in the sea.

First notes:

- Man-made landscape
- The destructive force of water (Hieronymus Bosch)
- Images of destruction
- 90% of all trade is transported by sea
- At sea, the brain receives 85% less information than on land
- Transport and trade are invisible
- Water carries
- Temporary nature

February 17

I meet Birthe at the pumping station. The equivalent of seven Olympic-size swimming pools of water is pumped through the station every minute. I have been walking around Lock Island for hours, already feeling defeated and not knowing where to begin. Everywhere I look, gates prevent me from coming any closer. The locks are entirely inaccessible. 'Can you not use the gates to your advantage?' Birthe asks. I hang over one when she leaves, watching the water fill up in the sea locks. I spot Konijn, an overseer of the island, working on a small boat in the locks. I feel frustrated not to be on that boat with him. He waves and shouts out for me to come down and join him. I climb down the steps onto the boat and we discuss the hazards of cold water and rheumatism. I am relieved to have made it to the other side. The skipper tells me that Konijn seems bad tempered, but has a big heart.

February 29

A large empty ship. Gijs calls me in the morning. 'Let's strike while the iron is hot! Today, we are taking you to sea,' he tells me. I wait for him in an office that looks like an old maritime club, filled with old paintings, leather chairs, knots and model ships. It is the headquarters of the pilots. I sign a disclaimer and head out to sea with two men on a small boat called a tender. Gijs has arranged I join a pilot called Vuyk. The tender waves span out from behind us. 'Do you suffer from seasickness?' they ask. Immediately, I do. One of the men takes me out back. He fastens me to a railing and I am leashed to the tender as it crashes down on the waves. We approach

a large red sea vessel and, as a favour from the men, we circle it so I can see all its sides. Both sides of the hull are covered in markings, scrapes and rust, a reflection of the vessel's hard work and constant exposure to salt water. Men lean over the railings, and halfway down the hull a ladder awaits us. Once more, the tender circles the vessel for me and the men help me up onto the first step. I climb up.

21 men work on board, mainly Filipino men, along with the Greek captain and the first officer. I feel sick. The officer gives me a tour of the ship, although, I'd much rather make my way straight to the bridge where I can get fresh air. He doesn't understand and continues to lead me up and down the decks, through cream-coloured hallways with synthetic walls, into the superstructure, passing the shared spaces and the sickbay. Seamen are kind like that.

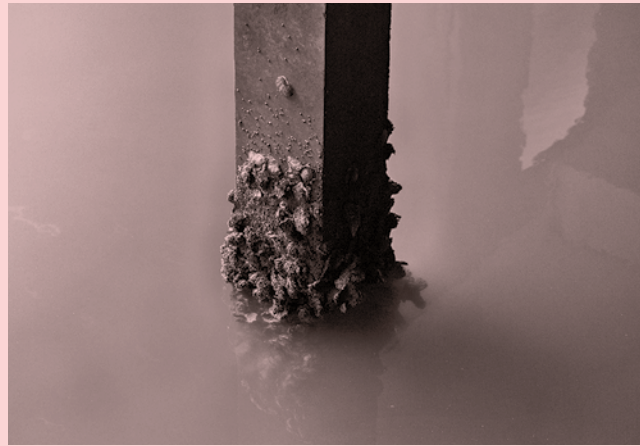
Vuyk tells me how sometimes he is woken in the night with a bad dream about the vessel colliding into the locks. He tells me how he tries to be self-sufficient by growing his own fruit and vegetables and how he sometimes hunts for meat. Recently, he shot a pig that turned out to be radioactive, and after calling around for advice decided to eat it. Vuyk is a serious man and a good tour guide, often peering outside and up ahead in deep concentration.

The ship enters the port of Amsterdam to pick up a load of steel. It's going to Bangladesh. They will avoid the Suez Canal and Somalian pirates by sailing around Africa instead. They have the time. The shipping industry is not doing that well.

March 9

Should I go to the locks today? If I don't then they win. I am reaching out to people, but nobody is returning my calls.

I park my car and wander around Lock Island, at least around what is left of it. The green field dotted with rabbit holes where I walked last week has been dug up and replaced with signposts, flags and yet another fence from OpenIJ. You can shove your locks! I think to myself. I walk along, what seems like endless green meshing, and feel like I am about to cry. I see Gijs, waiting at the traffic lights in his white Volvo. 'I've been meaning to email you back,' he says. 'Are you feeling down?' I explain how upset I am to work on an assignment where I have hardly any access to my subject. 'Perhaps, the only way forward on this island,' I tell him, 'is to continue to approach it from the water.' 'I will find you another ship,' he says, in his slow voice. He reminds me of Johan, an ex-boyfriend. I walk on, and for a moment



1 The Japanese oyster is an exotic species that was deliberately introduced to parts of the Netherlands. Today, it has spread and likes to cling to rocks along the coastline, specifically in the underwater chambers of the locks. It is resistant to tides and temperatures because of the 88 stress hormones it produces. We humans have merely 17. It is not yet clear if this particular exotic species is a threat or a benefit to the existing wildlife.



shed some tears of relief. Then Willy finally calls back, the bomb expert. 'Are you actually interested in finding a bomb?' I ask Willy. 'Or have you been doing this for so long that it no longer really excites you?' 'No, I hope to find a bomb, but mainly we only ever come across small pieces of ammunition and old car tires.' 'Like vacuuming a clean floor,' I say. 'Something that is only fun when you hear the reward rustling up the pipe.'

While I speak on the phone to Willy, I slide down some slippery rocks and get covered in seaweed, I stop at a layer of Japanese oysters growing along the waterline now revealed by the low tide.¹ We shake on it. We will go looking for bombs on the first Monday of spring. A day that is sure to bring us luck!

March 11

It's Friday and I haven't heard from Gijs. Looking out of the window I see a thick fog. I've waited for this light for over a month. I drive to the dunes to chase the light, to catch bikers amidst strangely shaped trees. In the car, I build up the courage to phone Gijs and remind him I need to go to sea. 'I suppose you'll be wanting a large ship,' he says. 'For the best possible view,' I reply. If I try the Kanaaldijk at 2 pm, he reassures me, he might just have something up his sleeve. I tell him I would be nowhere without him.

Up a ladder in the dunes, I'm still looking for an answer in the fog, to feel a sense of the landscape. Despite the thick foggy air, I feel nothing but hopelessness. It's a disposable piece of earth. Instead, I photograph the ladder and wonder if the project should be about my own exploration. I'm desperate for a concept, some sort of clarity, but maybe I'm going the wrong way about it. Perhaps, I simply need to accept that this is my way of working; inching my way across this island, and experiencing as much as possible.

At 2 pm, I arrive at the pilot station on Kanaaldijk. Gijs has hooked me up with another pilot, Simonatti. I am to join him for another trip on a sea vessel, through the locks, along the canal and to the Port of Amsterdam. I tell the men on the tender why I am here. They like my worker's boots. 'You will, however, sink to the bottom of the ocean if you fall in,' Simonatti tells me, 'because they will get too heavy'. He is not one for bending the rules. The pilots run a tight ship.

The sunshine sparkles on the surface of the water, creating a kind of moon-like landscape through the mist. Nine kilometres off the coast, we approach the Yeoman Bontrup. I stand on

the front of the tender to take photographs. Despite the waves, the tender maintains its position alongside the hull. The men instruct me on how best to climb up the ladder. They are precise, but so is this little boat. To the men's relief, I make my way up, quick as a flash. Russian seamen are awaiting us on the deck, and I follow Simonatti and the third officer into the superstructure. This vessel was once entirely gutted by fire and later replaced with the interior of an entirely different ship. The hallways are lined with pieces of flattened cardboard boxes, all taped together. I imagine the whole ship is lined with cardboard, but later learn this is the worker's deck and this is how it's protected from water and soot. It feels sterile to me but clean and calm. On the upper decks, dirty working clothes and boots are prohibited. We take a lift up to the bridge and I drink tea with the first officer, who offers me a tour of the ship on behalf of the captain. To me, the ship seems a little dull. Although, the sickbay is slightly more comfortable than the one I saw previously on the Oriental. There is a room dedicated entirely to ballast water management, filled with equipment, radars and monitoring devices. This way, with filters in the system, they are less likely to transfer exotic species like Japanese oysters accidentally from one country to another.

Another pilot joins us, Dirk Jan. He has been working all day yet you wouldn't say so and he smells fresh and of cologne. I have conversations with Simonatti about the problematics of burning fossil fuels, the green ship and environmental documentaries on Dutch television. With Dirk Jan, I talk about working night shifts and his growing up in Zaire. He tells me there's nothing else he'd like to do. Although, he'd quite like to go part-time. He likes the predictability of a steady job. We eat sausages together on his break in the officer's mess. In the hull of the ship, I come across small pink rocks from Scotland.

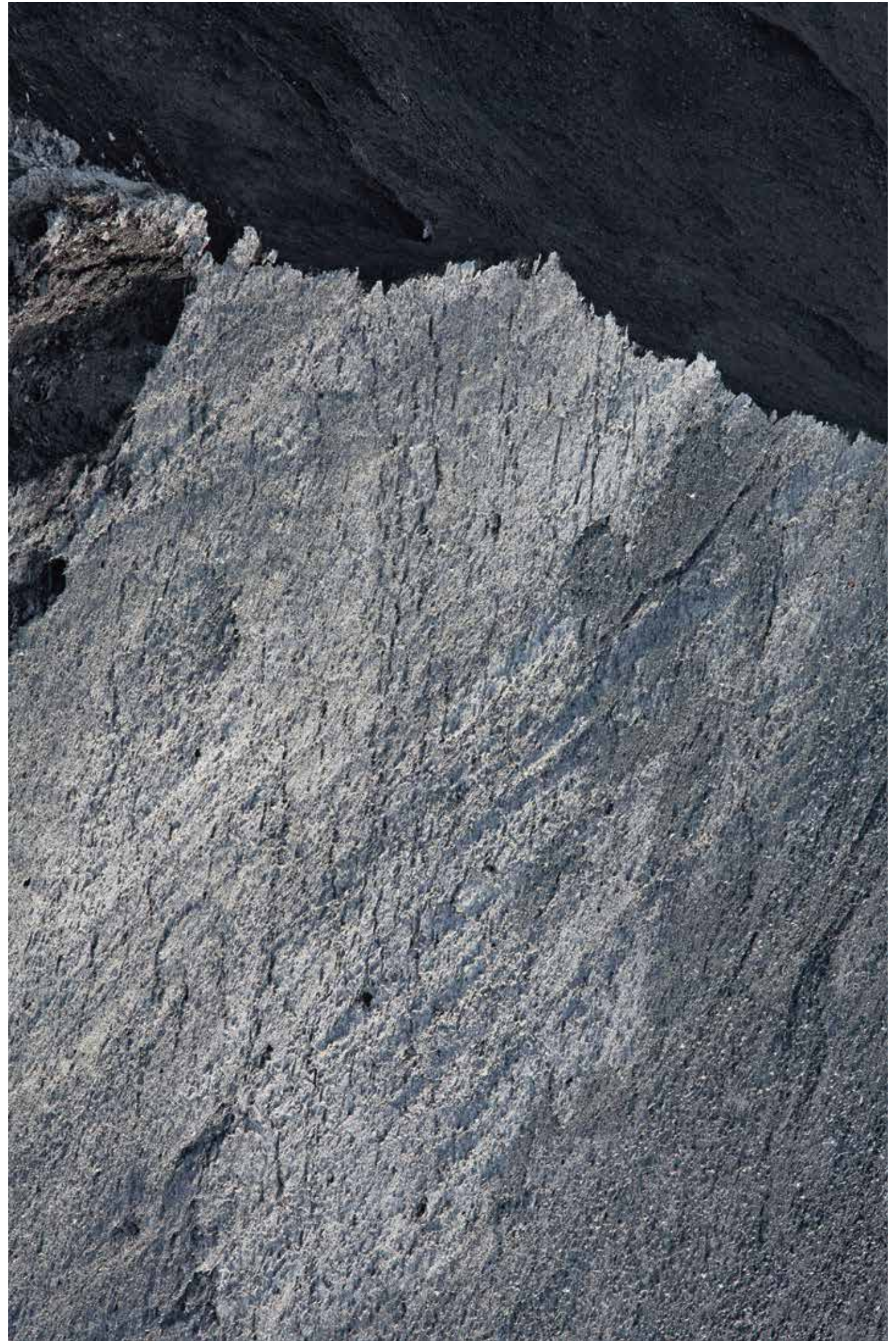
We arrive at a dock filled with stone and rock piled as high as mountains. Within a matter of seconds, the ship's arm has extended out to unload a waterfall of pink rock, cascading onto the pile beneath it. 'You should come on board for a week and I'll take you to the Scottish quarries,' the captain says to me. I write this down and contemplate a week at sea.

'The romance of the sea'

The pilot is guidance ... the lock guide ... the waterscape guide ...

Destruction, construction, transition, tradition, landscape

What is remembered through tradition and what is forgotten?





Glossary of associations

Again. The island has capitulated

Lock Island

A new lock under construction in a man-made landscape. 4,500,000 m³ of earth to be moved to construct the lock. Some of this earth is sucked away and deposited at the bottom of the North Sea, to be dug up again when needed.

Dutch landscape design

The sandy nature of much of its subsoil means that the Netherlands can take on any form desired.¹ And more than any element, it is water that defines the Dutch landscape. As other civilizations built cathedrals, the Dutch built a horizon.²

The Dutch have three traditions pertaining to landscape

1. Landscape design
2. Representation of landscape within the arts
3. Water management

OpenJ

Name of consortium of companies designing and building the new lock. OpenJ presented the most cost-efficient engineering plan during the tender for the new lock. Too cost efficient, some said. Can it be done? OpenJ brings 400 workers to Lock Island and is master of the locks during the engineering project, not the ministry responsible for infrastructure.

Grand creation: Creation as a result of destruction

Images of destruction

Land. Disappearing

Where is the public space on Lock Island?

Is there any such thing as public space here? Fences rise up. There is little space to walk around. The island has capitulated to the contractors. At times, it's difficult to know where you can and cannot go. Fences and signs give the impression that everything is off limits.

Animals

Removed from the island, except for two geese who have been together forever.

'Photograph the workers and the people living at the locks'. Construction of the first lock coincided with the dawn of industrial photography. Industrial development at the expense of landscape and workers.

My brief.

Is it possible to compare the current leap to previous leaps?

Industrialization versus ruin

Destruction as a precursor to construction. Collapse. Creation.

Painter Joseph Gandy (1771–1843) was commissioned by architect John Soane to represent his work over a period of forty years. In 1798 Gandy painted a fantasy impression of the Bank of England — Soane's proudest work — in ruins. The City of London is imagined as a swampy wilderness. It is the earliest example in Europe of a drawing in which an architect imagines a structure he has built as a ruin. Do new monuments remind us of old monuments?³

GOD be thanks: a ruin!⁴

Industry

Poetic industry

Orange-coloured clouds

My throat hurts

Noise pollution

On land and under water. Research shows whales, dolphins and porpoises subjected to underwater noise are more likely to be hindered in their ability to communicate and find prey.⁵

Birds

The captain of one particular ship doesn't like my taking photographs. I tell him I'm interested in the landscape, not ships, and photograph birds trailing the currents behind us in the locks. I do it rather demonstratively to let him get used to me. After a while he warms to me and calls me whenever there are birds swarming around us. Most of my pictures of birds fail but I keep photographing. Their repetitive patterns interest me. As does their resilience to the destruction and upheaval of land and water. As soon as they can, they settle in the sand. If they stay there too long, work on the locks has to be stopped. (Nature Protection Law).

Temporary nature

Nature which evolves naturally when no effort is made to prevent it from doing so. This public policy allows a landowner to remove flora and fauna if and when the opportunity arises and to use the land for commercial purposes which would otherwise not be allowed by the Dutch Nature Protection Law. The policy benefits all parties concerned, while the lack of such a policy elsewhere has encouraged practices that prevent anything from growing at all. By whatever means.

Temporary landscape

Mountains of coal disappear and appear from one week to the next as I drive through the port.

The Lockheed Ventura flown by Warrant Officer LLG Jones and crew, over IJmuiden, during the second of two daylight attacks, on the ovens of the Royal Dutch Steel Works. On this day, a total of 21 x 500 lbs. and 30 x 250 lbs. bombs were dropped. Image made by No. 21 Squadron RAF and part of Air Ministry Second World War Official Collection. © IWM (C 3404)



Photo number 4036. Flight RB554. Date 26 March 1944.

muddles readings, so most of the area must also be checked by hand. The surface is divided: 42% is land, 58% covered by water. Beneath the water, divers found 18 containers of steel waste that was not explosive. And many car tires. Although finding a bomb is a risky business, not finding one is riskier. Special teams brought found ammunition to a public beach nearby and detonated it. On the list of 'unfound' are two large Tallboys weighing 5443 kg apiece. They are unlikely to be detected. On land, three German bunkers were unexpectedly discovered. Graffiti on the walls and remains within the bunkers indicated they may have been used as dugouts by youths until the 1980s, but were covered after a fire broke out. The insides are scorched. Considering the value attributed to bunkers and their historical value, it is quite a mystery that these bunkers not only existed but had remained a secret until 2016. And though they were built to be indestructible, they were removed shortly after their discovery to allow work on the lock to continue.

Strike photo World War II. Source unknown.



Repetition. Routine.
Variation within repetition

I join the divers and am exhausted after a few hours. They dive, dive, dive for hours, days, months.

Seehunde

Type XXVII B. Midget submarines. Designed by the Germans at the end of 1944 in a final attempt to defeat the Allies in a war they were not winning. The submarines are part of the so-called *Kleinkampf Verband*: a series of small-scale attempts at ingenious attacks. Eighteen types of submarine were quickly designed at the end of the war. Most were not a success. Submarines are cunning but vulnerable and stressful for crews.

The *Seehunde* model was one of the more successful designs: 11.86 metres long and 1.68 metres wide. They were built for 48 hours of duty but this frequently resulted in voyages lasting more than four days. A submerged *Seehund* would have 45 minutes of oxygen — extended by the use of nitrogen capsules. A submerged *Seehund* would immediately rise to the surface when firing one of its heavy missiles because of the sudden decrease in weight. To fire was to rise and be detected. To fire was to be killed. There was a *Seehunde* station at Lock Island from which the Germans attacked Allied ships approaching land. Ultimately, their ingenious submarines had little success and the Germans capitulated.²⁰

Can't breathe water

Da Vinci's invention of diving suits

While working in Venice in 1500, Da Vinci designed one of the first diving suits. He considered water the driving force of all nature.²¹ The leather diving suit was equipped with a bag-like mask that went over the diver's head. Attached to the mask around the nose area were two bamboo tubes that led up to a cork air reservoir floating on the surface.

Air was provided through the tubes to the diver below. The mask was also equipped with a valve-operated balloon that could be inflated or deflated, so the diver could more easily surface or sink. The suit included a pouch for urination. Da Vinci's diving suit design was little known until collections of his drawings and notes, in particular the *Codex Atlanticus*, were published in late 19th century.²² These original designs were improved upon by the astronomer and mathematician Edmund Halley, who gave his name to Halley's Comet.

Divers compared to astronauts:
they go where the body shouldn't be

The Ocean is actually a liquid medium. Although portions of the top layer can become a solid under certain conditions. The ocean conducts sound and other vibrational activities and is in constant motion. Our oceans consist primarily of ordinary (H₂O) water, dissolved minerals such as salt, iron, calcium and carbon with suspended gases such as oxygen and carbon dioxide. Moreover, there are even traces of heavy water (which contains a heavier form of hydrogen called Deuterium). Our oceans are a medium capable of supporting life. Both plants and animals. With varying sizes from the microscopic to the gargantuan. The oceans are also a giant heat sink for maintaining and regulating the temperatures and climate of

Reading and viewing list

Allan Sekula
Fish Story
Performance Under Working Conditions

Noël Burch, Allan Sekula
Forgotten Space (film)

C. van Es
Bles Voor de Kop, Geschiedenis en volksleven van IJmuiden (Dutch)

Christopher Woodward
In ruins

Conny Braam
De Woede van Abraham (Dutch)

David Nixon
International Space Station — Architecture Beyond Earth

Historische Kring Velsen
Een Gemeente in Oorlogstijd — Velsen 1940–1945 (Dutch)

Ernest Shackleton
South, The Endurance Expedition

J.G. Ballard
The Drowned World

John McPhee
Looking for a Ship

Joseph Conrad
Lord Jim; The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'

Matthew Parker
Hell's Gorge, The Battle to build the Panama Canal

Miek Zwamborn
Oploper (Dutch)

René ten Bos
Water

Rob van Soest (NL)
De Amsterdamse Haven 1275–2005 (Dutch)

Rosalind M. Rolland et al. publication in The Royal Society
Evidence That Ship Noise Increases Stress in Right Whales (article)

Rose George
Ninety Percent of Everything

Samuel Taylor Coleridge
The Rime of the Ancient Mariner

Tommy Wieringa
Joe Speedboot (Dutch)

Ton Lemaire
Filosofie van het landschap

Tracy Metz & Maartje van den Heuvel
Sweet & Salt: Water and the Dutch

Veronica Strang
Water — Nature and Culture

William Basinski
Disintegration Loop (music)

Stanley Kubrick
2001: A Space Odyssey (film)



IJmuiden 1946. Fotobureau van der Werff Haarlem,
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Natascha Libbert

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Natascha Libbert

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www.eriskayconnection.com

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fonds voor de
kunst

M
mondriaan
fonds

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I dream. I am on a ship.
The ship is a mountain.
I want to climb to the top.

In 2016 the Province of Noord-Holland and the Noord-Hollands Archive commissioned Natascha Libbert to photograph the sea locks at IJmuiden. Redevelopment of the locks between 2016 and 2022 will facilitate the passage of increasingly large freight and cruise ships, thereby consolidating the position of the Port of Amsterdam.

What started as a study of the locks and surroundings gradually evolved into a broader exploration of themes such as destruction and construction, the invisibility of sea transport, and the landscape changes brought about by port development. As the volume of freight carried across the seas increases, the shipping industry disappears further and further from our consciousness.

As she navigated her way through the maritime world, Libbert not only took photographs but also kept a logbook, wrote a glossary, and compiled archival and reference material, all of which collectively document her time at the locks, on the seas and in the port.