pavilion

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The Remotely Intimate, or the Intimately Remote: Eva Stenram's Per Pulverem Ad Astra

In June this year, the physicist Stephen Hawking pessimistically proposed that, in the face of impending threats such as global warming, the ongoing survival of the human race is dependent upon the future colonisation of other planets. His subsequent prediction that a lunar settlement may only be twenty years away and a Martian colony only forty, took a peculiar hold upon my own relation to and understanding of 'outer space'. Whilst the prospect of a human occupation of the Martian landscape served to bring that alien world somehow closer, at the same time it seemed to confirm its present remoteness. Indeed, for all but a privileged few, such interplanetary communications take place only through photography and film. From the grainy grey footage of man's first steps on the moon, to the high resolution panoramas transmitted to Earth from Mars, the majority of us remain entirely dependent upon these modern media to visualise or experience other planets.

Like Hawking's comments, such imagery acts to temporarily bridge a gap – that truly unimaginable distance – which stands between us and these other worlds. In these terms, photography represents a medium of access, offering select glimpses of remote and alien spaces that presently lie beyond our reach. Yet the self-proclaimed necessity of the photograph as our mediator – our marked dependency upon it as a substitute for the real – acts to simultaneously affirm the remoteness of these vistas, the unassailability of the distance that stands between these worlds and our own. As a result, such photographs prompt a disorientating stumble between seemingly polarised extremes: a sense of closeness and of distance, the accessible and the closed, a notion of the knowable and that which remains unknown.

It is precisely these tensions – innate to any photograph, but particularly true of those depicting other planets – that provide the conceptual and aesthetic impetus for Eva Stenram's *Per Pulverem Ad Astra*. For this series, as with much of her work, Stenram began not with a camera, but with a number of photographs drawn from the plethora of pre-existing images that bombard us all on a daily basis. In the case of *Per Pulverem Ad Astra*, these were a number of photographs sent to Earth from Mars over the course of several years by two US 'rovers', available to download as high resolution digital files from the NASA website. After cropping the panoramic images in Photoshop, Stenram took them to one of the few print labs in London offering to transform digital files into analogue – a process that, as though wilfully turning back the clock on photographic history, returned the immaterial, democratic and downloadable source images to the realm of the physical and the unique. The result, a number of 35mm negatives, that were distributed strategically around the artist's flat and left to gather dust, introducing an additional ritualistic aspect to her creative process, before they were finally hand-printed to produce the complex and compelling colour photographs presented here.

Whilst respectful to the unique aesthetic quality of the original images, Stenram's subsequent interventions leave us to gaze upon the Martian landscape, through, or past her dusty accumulations. At times, these appear simply as the visual traces of dust gathered on the surface of a photographic negative, yet at others, they are quite consciously permitted to appear as something more, taking on the form of distant constellations or cosmic clouds gathering above the framed views of red rock and craters. Recalling Joan Fontcuberta's confusion of stars and splattered flies in his series *Constellations* (2001), or Richard Purdy's playful and ambiguous *Crêpe/planéte* (2001), these photographs offer a satirical celebration of the photograph's potential fictions, the camera's inability to differentiate hair from star, particle from planetary storm, the near and microscopically small from the distant and astronomically large.

In many ways *Per Pulverem Ad Astra* takes its inspiration from Man Ray's witty and incisive image, *La Monde* (1931), a photogram of an electrical cord imposed upon an image of the Earth photographed from space. Like Man Ray's photogram, Stenram's dusty additions to her source images introduce a comic and telling co-existence to her work, as two competing sets of visual claims vie for prominence. On the one hand, we are presented with the original photographs of the Martian landscape, asked, at least temporarily, to accept the pictorial illusion of space and depth created by the camera's imposition of single point perspective. On the other, we are shown the white accumulations of dust that have gathered upon the surfaces of the images, asserting the flatness of the picture and the existence of the photograph as a material object. As with *La Monde*, this niggling but continual reminder of the two-dimensionality of the photograph prevents any whole-hearted acceptance of its role as a window onto reality, re-emphasising the camera's mediatory character when it comes to popular visualisations of outer space.

Stenram's choice of dust as the physical matter through which to create this dialogue is by no means incidental. In semiotic terms, dust – and particularly dust of this nature – holds a particular indexical role. In general terms, such physical detritus signifies an absent human presence, as the matter we discard on a daily basis. The fact that the dust cultivated upon Stenram's negatives – the mixture of skin, hair, sweat and dirt – was gathered gradually under her bookshelves and bed, cooker and coffee table, lends it a highly personal indexical role, signifying a world intimate and microscopic in character, far removed from the grand panoramas of a distant planet with which it is now prompted to interact. If Stenram's series concerns itself with differing notions of space – outer space, pictorial space – then her dusty interventions introduce an additional type of space - that of the personal and domestic - to *Per Pulverem Ad Astra*.

For all these contradictions and competing significatory claims, the peculiar co-existence of these two worlds within a single image introduces a final, perplexing, commonality to their relationship. Like the Martian landscape, the interior of Stenram's flat – the personal, domestic and intimate arena signified by the dust – remains for most of us beyond the limits of direct experience. It is a closed and private world to which we are unlikely to gain entry, a microscopic realm of dust and debris that remains inaccessible and unseen, experienced only indirectly here through its photographic trace.