



Skyglow, an Inquiry about Light Pollution and the Natural Light of the Stars, Ongoing

In the last years, Francesco Del Conte has shifted his research toward the observation of natural and artificial luminous phenomena that present social and cultural concerns to further the understanding of the photographic medium within the realm of the visual arts. As discussed later, throughout the research project *Skyglow*, the light will be considered not as one of the elements that allow the functioning of the photographic technique but rather the object of study itself. This paradigm change enables a few thoughts concerning the nature of photography, the position of the author, and his/her relationship with the light-sensitive tool. The work *Skyglow* - an English word referring to the luminance of the night sky caused by artificial light sources - is on edge between contemporary art, astronomy, and environmental sciences and aims to question the photographic standard by addressing the effects produced by light pollution on sky observation.

Environmental Context

Artificial light at night is called light pollution, and it has been defined as “globally one of the most widely distributed forms of anthropogenic pollution.”¹ Despite the object of an extensive number of scientific studies, as a global society, we are not so aware of it, or at least not as we are of other kinds of pollution. Humans have radically disrupted Earth’s predictable day and night cycle by lighting up the latter. However, artificial light at night has downsides for many creatures, including amphibians, birds, mammals, in-

¹ Thomas W. Davies, Jonathan Bennie, Richard Inger, Kevin J. Gaston, “Artificial light alters natural regimes of night-time sky brightness”, *Scientific Reports* 3, 1722 (2013), p.1.

sects, and plants.²

Aesthetically, sky glow obscures our view of natural starlight and moonlight, and scientists have attempted to measure its impact. In 2001, the data showed that 60% of the world’s inhabited areas were affected by artificial sky glow,³ while in 2016, the percentage of the world’s population affected by light pollution had increased to 83%.⁴ The severity of the situation has led astronomers to campaign for darker skies in urban and suburban regions and to establish the first international dark sky parks for recreational stargazing. Moreover, it has been noted that increasing urbanized lifestyles and the loss of naturally lit sky were crucial to the “extinction of experience” and to distance people from the natural environment.⁵

Theoretical Context

Since its inception, photography has been the subject of increasing debate within the art world. Around the mid-nineteenth century, Charles Baudelaire described it as a mere technical solution, «a refuge of all failed painters with too little talent.»⁶ Just as in the

² Kevin J. Gaston, Jonathan Bennie, Thomas Wynter Davies, John Hopkins, “The ecological impacts of nighttime light pollution: a mechanistic appraisal”, *Cambridge Philosophical Society*, 88, 4 (2013), p. 915.

³ Davies, “Artificial light”, p.1.

⁴ Fabio Falchi, Pierantonio Cinzano, Dan Duriscoe, Christopher C. M. Kyba, Christopher D. Elvidge, Kimberly Baugh, Boris A. Portnov, Nataliya A. Rybnikova and Riccardo Furgoni, “The new world atlas of artificial night sky brightness”, *Science Advances*, 2, 6 (2016), p. 4.

⁵ Davies, “Artificial light”, p.1.

⁶ Claudio Marra, *Fotografia e arti visive* (Roma: Carrocci Edi-

Fig.1 Installation view, 10 A.M. ART gallery, Milan, 2022

manufacturing world, machines began to replace humans in the very act of connecting them to their surrounding. If compared to other mimetic techniques, though, photography needs a visible referent, and the relationship between photography and reality is well described by Rosalind Krauss' words «A photograph is an index or trace, a significant mark that bears a connection to the thing it represents by having been caused, physically, by its referent.»⁷ Light is the other essential condition that allows the photographic process to exist. Similar to the human eye, Cameras read how light is absorbed or reflected by the objects that compose the surrounding reality, to the point that we might even say that photographs are just an infinite set of luminous values. Yet, in opposition to this cynical consideration, it can be argued that photographers imbue the images with other values, such as emotional, conceptual, symbolic, and scientific.

On the pivotal role of the author, Susan Sontag has pointed out that « Even when photographers are most concerned with mirroring reality, they are still haunted by tacit imperatives of taste and conscience [...] In deciding how a picture should look, in preferring one exposure to another, photographers are always imposing standards on their subjects. Although there is a sense in which the camera does indeed capture reality, not just interpret it, photographs are as much an interpretation of the world as paintings and drawings are.»⁸ Since the day Nicéphore Niépce produced the photograph that is universally recognized as the first in

history,⁹ professional and amateur photographers have been portraying similar subjects with different technologies and awareness until today. After the digital and computer revolution, the number of photographs realized has increased dramatically. Nowadays, the existence of online archives that sell photographs made by professionals has not made people desist from taking pictures, even if there would be no need anymore on some levels. Nevertheless, people keep taking their photographs, mainly for biographical reasons and personal pleasure.

Contemporary artists began to make artworks using images found on social media, and a well-known case is the installation *24 Hours in Photos* presented by Erik Kessels in 2011 for the 10th anniversary of the FOAM Museum in Amsterdam. The project gathered every photo uploaded in a twenty-four-hour time frame on the image-sharing site Flickr; the images were then printed out and exhibited in one large space.

Even before the digital shift, Vilém Flusser identified the tendency to generate repetitive images, recognizing that «every photograph is a realization of one of the possibilities contained within the program of the camera. The number of such possibilities is large, but it is nevertheless finite: it is the sum of all those photographs that can be taken by a camera. It is true that one can, in theory, take a photograph over and over again in the same or a very similar way, but this is not important for the process of taking photographs. Such images are “redundant”: they carry no new information and are superfluous.»¹⁰

Light itself has rarely been the subject of photographic practice, but mainly the key that allows it to function. Del Conte's interest in moving the attention from the referent to this other element essential to the photographic process means to point the camera at light. This move involves a few questions: is it possible to produce not only reality interpretations by considering light the object of the research? For example, is it possible to create photographs that also carry information?

Working method

These considerations led the artist to conceive an experimental process which in 2021 gave birth to the first composition of *Skyglow*. The methodology involves shooting photographs of the same constellations from several locations with different levels of light pollution. The settings of the large format camera, always aimed at the zenith of the sky, are the same in each place: type of lens, kind of film, aperture, point of focus, exposure time, and atmospheric conditions.

Following this set of rules, the only factor influencing the density of the photographic emulsion is the amount of artificial light recorded by the camera. Francesco Del Conte applied this method in three locations: the Tabernas Desert in Andalusia, the Italian Apennines in Emilia-Romagna, and Turin, where he lives. In each place, he has photographed the same region of the sky by using as coordinates three different stars: Vega, Altair, and Deneb, which are visible in the center of the pictures. The artist replicated the same 30-minute exposure by employing an astronomical device called equatorial mount, which allows the camera to be synchronized with the Earth's rotation and thus avoid star trails. Nine photographs, printed as gelatin silver prints, resulted from this research.

Del Conte did not choose these three stars for aesthetic nor narrative reasons, but because throughout summer, they are at the zenith of

the sky and, due to their high brightness, visible also from very light-polluted areas. The photographs can be looked at horizontally and vertically; there isn't an order, and they are just what they are: light's chemical and optical action onto the photosensitive emulsion. The artist has transformed the camera into a light recorder - a functional device - while the film behind the lens has become just a surface sensitive to light. Photography is no longer a tool for exploring the concepts of narrative, space, and composition but a carrier of valuable information independent of the author's interpretations. Del Conte attempts to use the light-sensitive technique analytically and objectively. In response to the iper-narcissistic application of the photographic medium within our digitalized society, he relinquishes his power to decide how the picture should look and confine his taste and subjective view of the world.

tore, 2014), p.24

7 Rosalind Krauss, "Tracing Nadar", October, 5 (1978), p.34

8 Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Groux, 1978), pp.3-4

9 Italo Zannier, *Architettura e Fotografia* (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 1991), p.10

10 Vilém Flusser, *Toward a Philosophy of Photography* (Berlin: European Photography Andreas Müller-Phole, 1983), p.26

In this radical version of the project, Del Conte has exposed several 4x5 films to light pollution for 1 hour. He did not use the equatorial mount and he did not focus the lens. Instead, the photographs show circles of different gradations according to the amount of artificial light recorded.

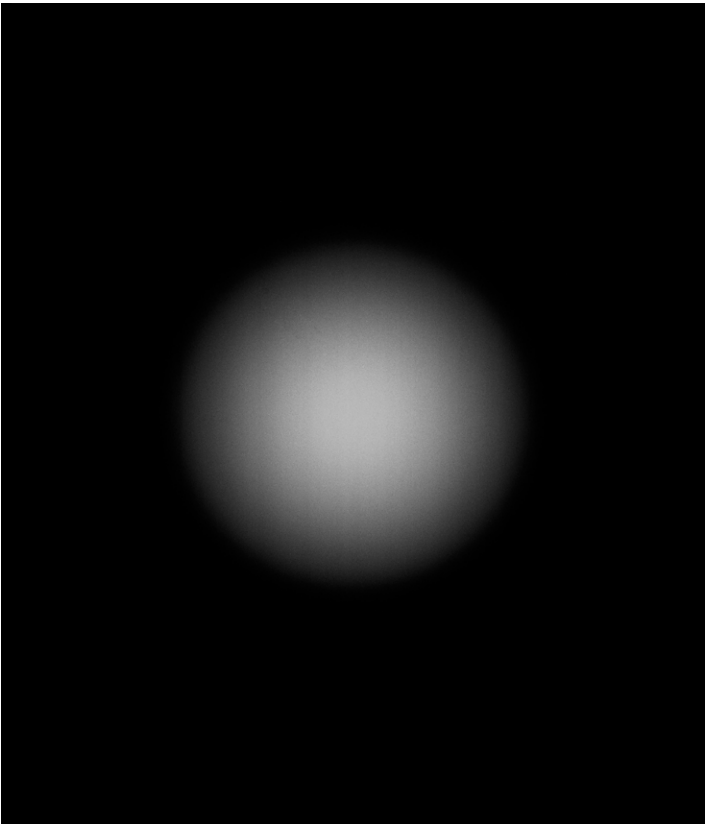
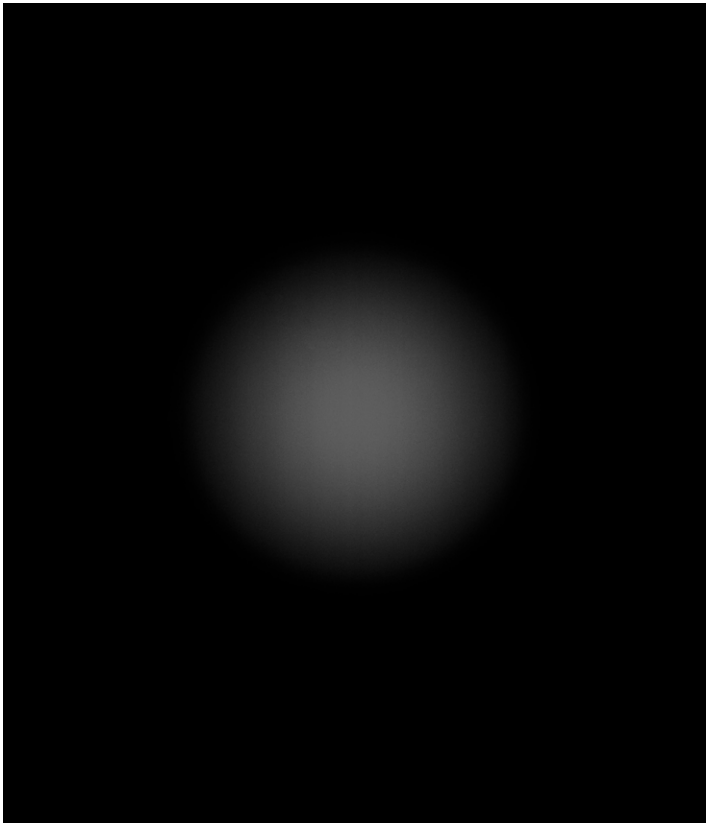


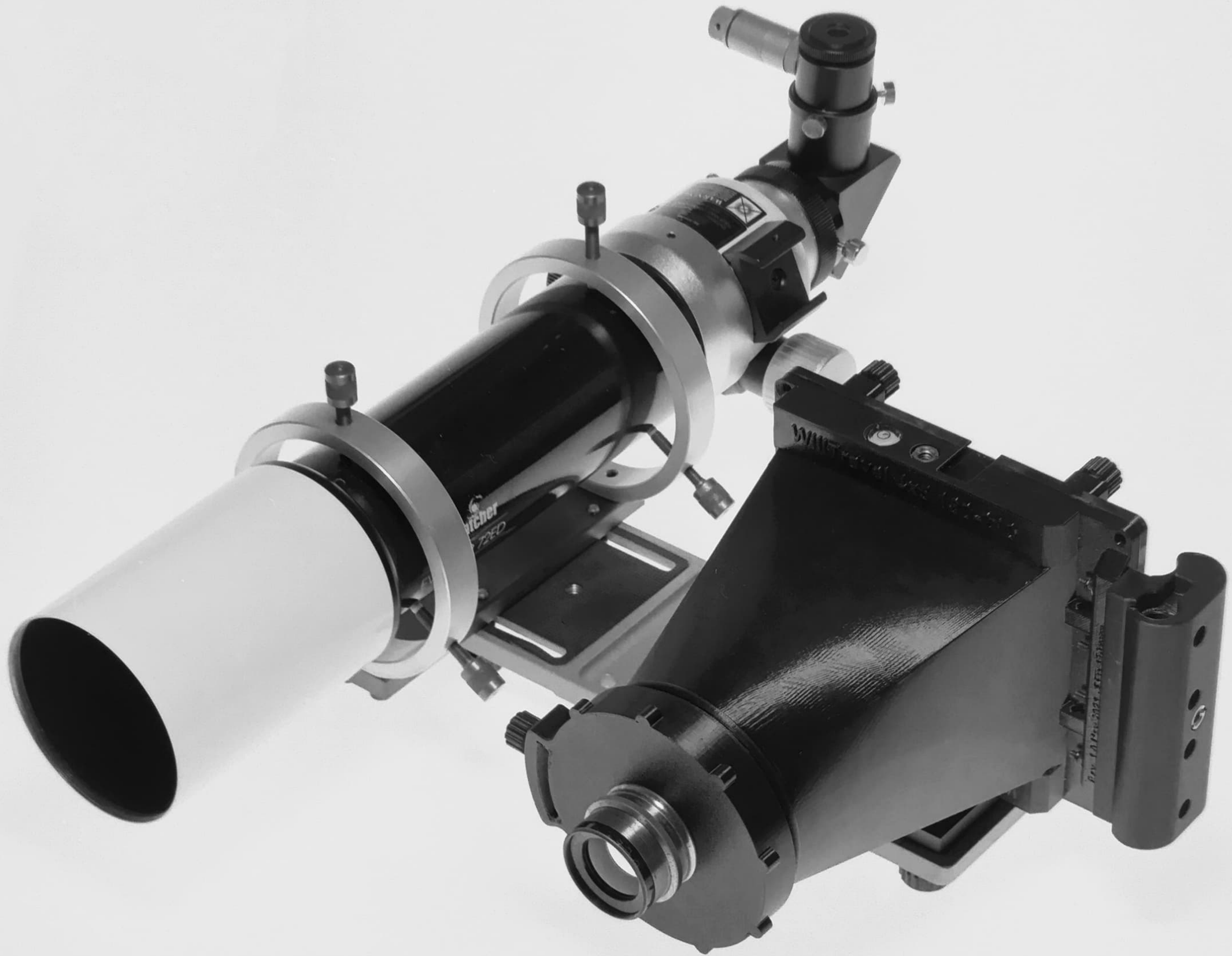
Fig. 2 Three gelatin silver prints, 100x80 cm, ED 3+2 AP, 2023



Fig. 3.5 Rural and Inner-City Sky, details, gelatin silver prints, 100x80 cm, ED 3+2 AP, 2023
Fig. 4 Val Veny



Image 01
Image 02
Image 03
Image 04
Image 05



With the aid of an equatorial mount, a sophisticated device used for astronomical observations, each photograph was the result of a 30-minute exposure. Three different locations were selected for this composition: the Tabernas Desert in Andalusia, the Italian Apennines in Emilia-Romagna and the city of Turin.

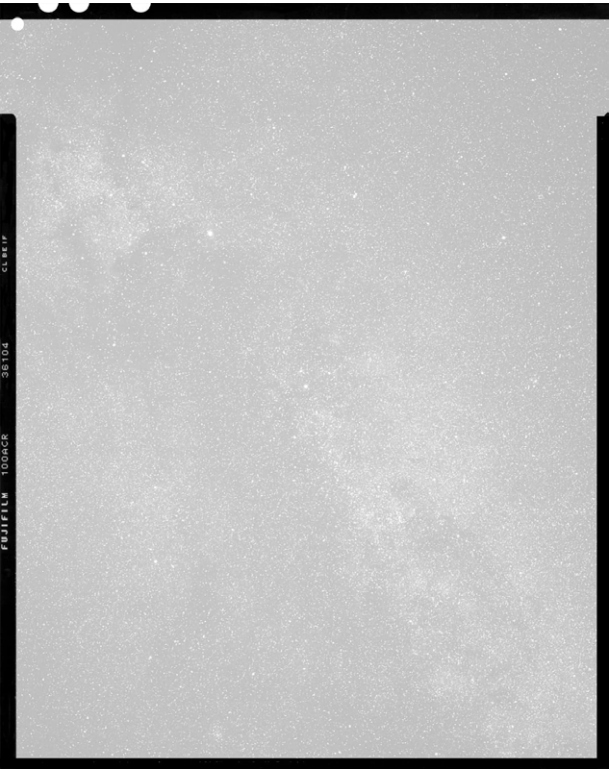
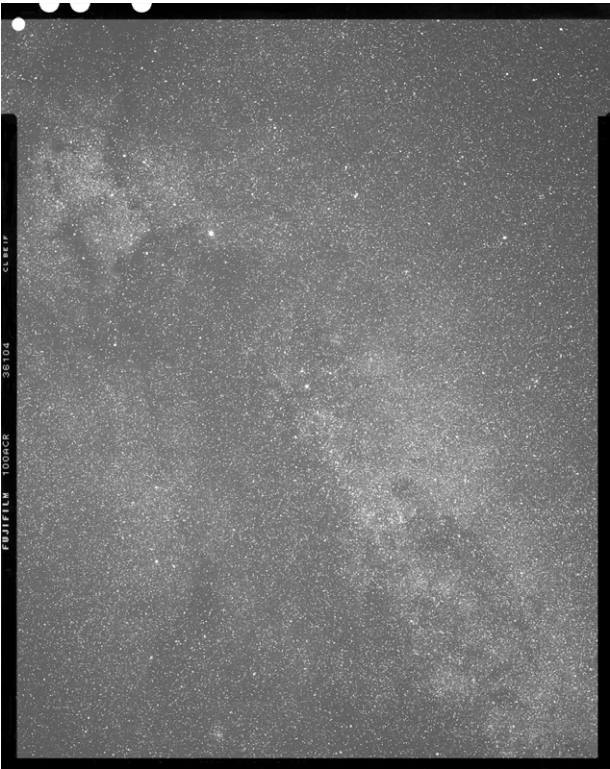
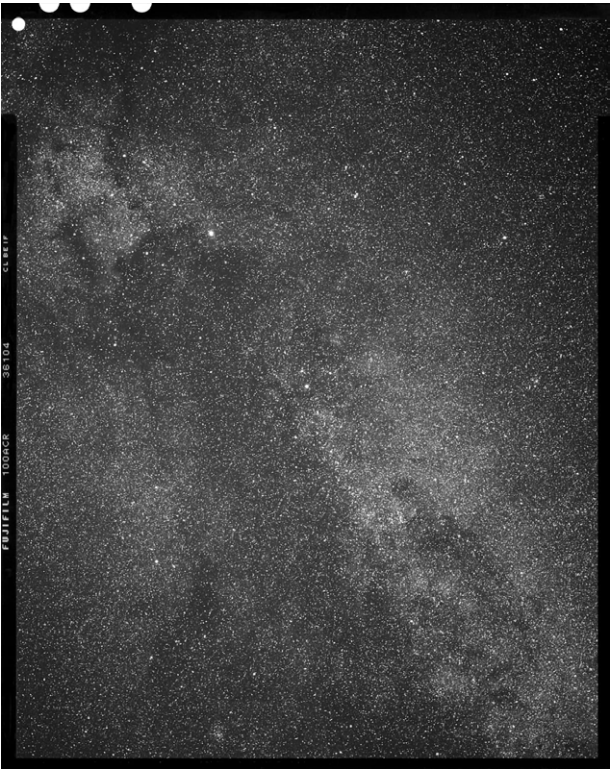
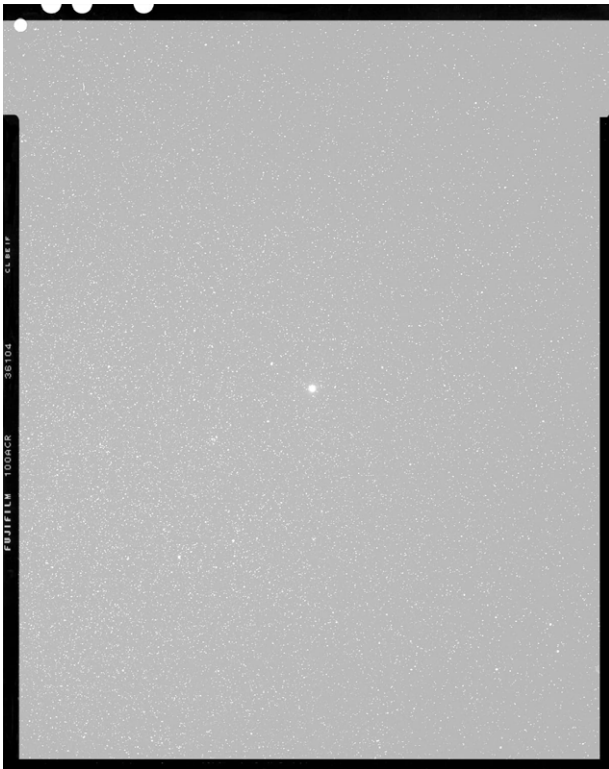
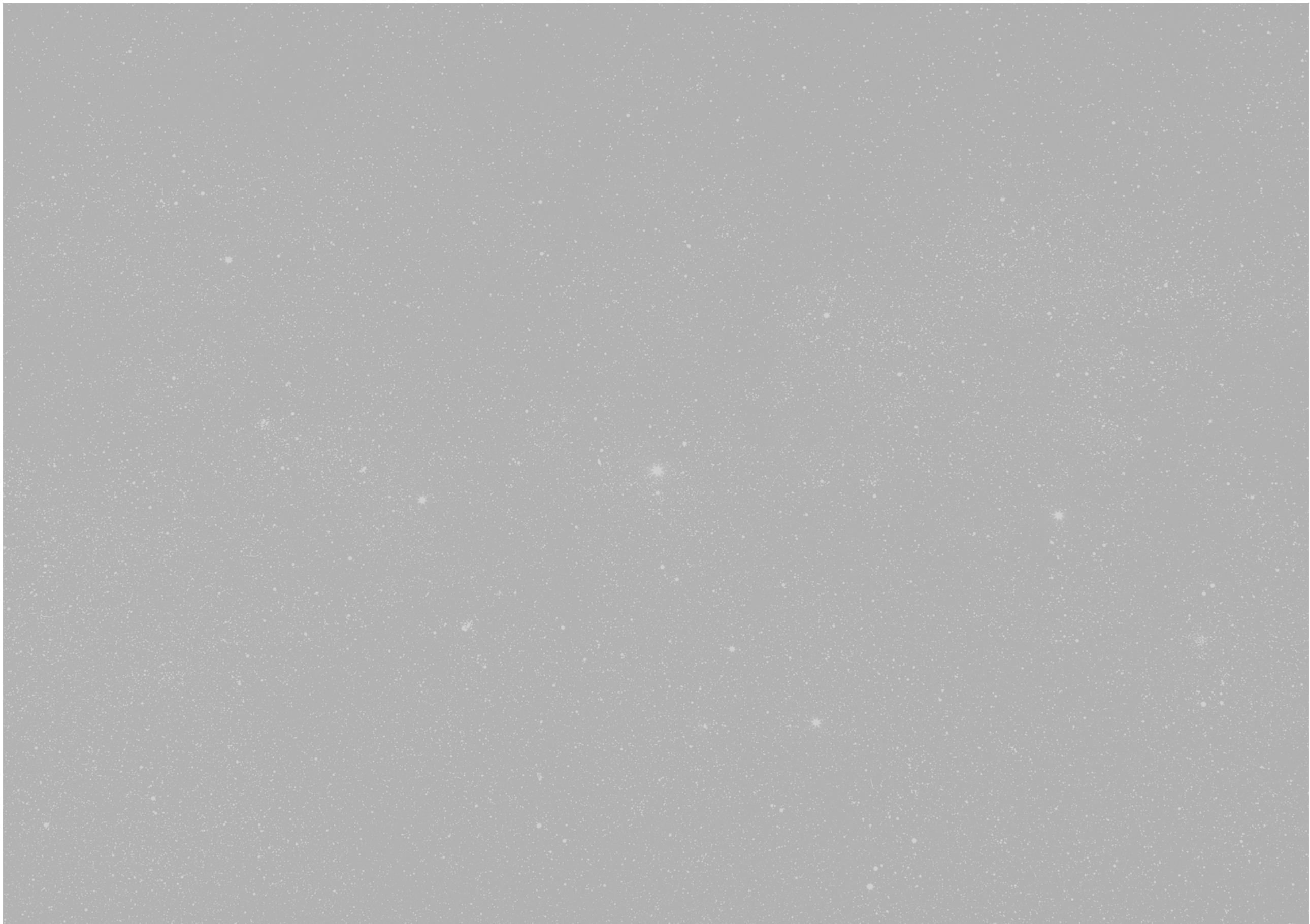


Fig. 6 Installation view, Foto Forum, Bolzano, 2024
Fig. 7 Equipment, gelatin silver print, 50x60 cm, ED 3+2 AP, 2021
Fig. 8 Vega and Deneb, six gelatin silver prints, 30x40 cm each, ED 3+2 AP, 2022







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Fig. 9 Tabernas Desert, 2022

Fig. 10 Schedar from Colle dell'Agnello, detail

Fig. 11 Schedar from Turin, detail

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Fig.13 Installation view, V/MSP gallery, Brussels, 2025

Fig. 14, 15 Installation view, Foto Forum, Bolzano, 2024

Fig. 16, 17 Installation view, 10 A.M. ART gallery, Milan, 2022



Fig. 12 Large Format Lens, gelatin silver print, 50x60 cm, ED 3+2 AP, 2021



