Clouded vision: strategies of occlusion in photographic representations of the other-than-human.

"We can only love what we can see." Barbara Kingsolver.

Part 1: Our entangled existence

We are in the midst of an existential crisis. As we all know, the U.N are now telling us that "cascading and interlinked crises are putting the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in grave danger, along with humanity's very own survival." We as a species continue to consume the natural elements of the planet at a voracious and unsustainable rate. The Western extractivist framing of these elements as 'resources", conceptualised during the period of the Enlightenment, is enabled through an anthropocentric vision of the universe, centring human existence and simultaneously disenfranchising all other-than-human existences. In this paper I propose that a recalibration of this vision is necessary as one of the processes required to shift our world-view and potentially mitigate these crises.

The United Nations offers a definition of global citizenship as "the belief that individuals are members of multiple, diverse, local and non-local networks rather than single actors affecting isolated societies". In order to decentre our human experience, we must acknowledge that this membership extends to the other-than-human elements of our planet, understanding that this will more fully recognise our global ecologies as "the totality or pattern of relations between organisms and their environment". Human and other-than-human existence is inextricably bound together, *entangled* as Merlin Sheldrake describes it in his seminal work on fungi and mushrooms. This shared planetary citizenship is the lived experience of indigenous cultures, and beginning to be reflected in new legislation such as that recognising the "personhood" of Te Awa Whanganui/the Whanganui River in Aotearoa-New Zealand.

If we are to build on this acknowledgement and honouring of our non-human kin, it seems plausible that first we must truly "see" them. This visible citizenry, this kinship, necessitates mutual care, and can be leveraged as a call to action in terms of social justice. (Azoulay, 2021)When visual strategies offer agency and visibility to an other-than-human phenomenon, I suggest that this witnessing can catalyse advocacy in the service of the natural world

Part 2: Photography and the violence of vision

Photography is inextricably bound, through theory and practice, to the notion of visibility, and the implications and impacts of becoming visible are not universally positive. Pre-dating its actualisation by centuries, scientists, alchemists, artists and philosophers dreamt of obtaining the ability to fix an image. The language of the darkroom underlines this desire; the colloquial terms for the chemistry required to halt development of the negative or print and that required to prevent it degrading are "stop" and "fix". This process of fixing of the photographic subject has been described in evidential, indexical and melancholic terms by a variety of theorists. Roland Barthes states that in photographs "there is always a defeat of Time..; that is dead and that is going to die" (Barthes, 1981) Film theorist André Bazin speaks of the preservation of a moment in a photograph as an 'embalming", and Susan Sontag links the indexical properties of a photograph with that of a death mask. (Sontag, 2002)

Sontag has much else to say about the negative impacts for human subjects of being "fixed" in a photograph; in *On Photography* she discusses the voyeuristic and exploitative potential of the lens, and the ways in which photographs have immured us to post-colonial, violent and capitalist traumas. Photographs contain within their fixed nature the potential to re-inscribe that trauma. As an example, we can think about the Zealy daguerreotypes. In 1850 Louis Agazzis, a

prominent Harvard professor and zoologist, commissioned the coerced set of portraits as part of a study intended to support his racist claims of the biological inferiority of Black people. The enslaved subjects of the daguerreotypes were forcibly stripped to the waist and documented; fixed. Sarah Elizabeth Lewis, Associate Professor at Harvard, states: "The Zealy daguerreotypes offer a clear, chilling example of how representation and vision have been structured and conditioned in a representative democracy built on an ideal of freedom that was constructed, supported, and enriched by the thoroughgoing support of enslaved labor on stolen Indigenous land."
Since 1976 when the images re-surfaced, artists have been at the forefront of efforts to make reparation through new forms of representation. Black American photographer Carrie Mae Weems and more recently Swiss-Haitian artist Sasha Huber have worked to depose Agazzis and instead to raise up the names of those he subjugated.

Part 3: Occlusions of vision

These tensions and complexities characterise the medium of photography and permeate its histories. The ethics of photographic representation of human subjects has been extensively reconsidered in the later 20th Century and into the new millennium; those who photograph have wrestled with their responsibilities to the subject of their images and admitted the real possibility that the viewing of their images would subject those pictured to the re-inscription of stereotypes & prejudices, recognising photography's function as "an active agent of Western colonising authority" (Sealy, 2014) But how do we begin to think through the corresponding problems of colonising representation when we consider the photo-filmic imaging of the landscape and its other-than-human inhabitants? If we attend to the history of photography of the land, we can trace the Western project of enclosure, privatisation, invasion and commodification through visual approaches that have included a continuation of sublime and picturesque traditions that situate our environment as separate from ourselves. Photographic apparatus has been complicit in early land survey photographs, aerial reconnaissance and surveillance images, ruin-porn, and the online circulation of travel & landscape imagery as proof of lifestyle.

Celestographs.

Edouard Glissant calls for an "right to opacity" as protection against the acquisitive and commodifying gaze of the project of the West. (Cailler, 1999) In re-reading Glissant, John Drabinski determines that the power of this opacity "lies in its anticolonial force, and therefore its resistance to certain senses of knowing and understanding that would seek to absorb, reactivate, and possess." (Drabinski, 2019)
However, thinking of this opacity as a force field that offers ongoing protection is to misunderstand Glissant's proposition, argues Benjamin P. Davis. (Davis, 2019) Rather, opacity is a state to be worked for and achieved, an active verb rather than a passive noun. How, then can lens-based practitioners who wish to work into a space of partial and resistant opacity, operate in a field where advancing technology and market are constantly agitating for more and sharper vision?
Through processes of lens-based and lens-less photographic imaging many practitioners are investigating degrees of visibility in relation to the more-than-human citizens of the world. When considering these practices, it is useful to consider the relationship of their outputs to notions of legibility; can a photographic practice that is based on observation and documentation avoid rendering it's subjects transparent, and thus exposing them to a colonising gaze, even when that subject is other-than-human? How can strategies of opacity and empathetic "listening" be imparted to a lens-based practice? Given all we know of its context and history, care must be extended to the methodologies and contexts within which the camera is operated. However, we can move beyond this paranoic relationship to lens-based documentary practice, as Erica

Balsom suggests, to *"leave behind a pedagogy of suspicion and instead assert the importance of the nonhuman automatism of the camera as a means for encountering the world."*[1]

Part 4: Strategies of resistance

Many contemporary lens-based and filmic practices are exploring methodological approaches to this protective state of partial, incomplete or occluded vision, and I would like to share some of these practices with you.

Ann Shelton is a photographic artist living and working in Aotearoa: In *Jane Says*, and *i am an old phenomenon*, Shelton utilises stand-ins for the representation of erased and marginalised human narratives and plant knowledge. Shelton has long eschewed human representation in her photographs, as a tactic to prevent a reinscribing of unwanted or unintended stereotypes and biases onto her subjects. For the last decade Shelton has worked extensively with plant knowledge, sourced from alternative and repressed histories of female reproduction, contraception and healing. In this series the hyper-detailed digital nature of Shelton's recent work is harnessed to the impossible task of imaging the invisible. Shelton's images summon and rehabilitate wise-woman archetypes using digital technologies, ikebana and the tropes of still-life. She augments her images with passages of para-fictional text and long informational titles, asking us us to "see" the invisible, marginalised and persecuted women she summons through her beautifully crafted and staged images.

Kate van Der Drift is also a practitioner living and working in Aotearoa: In these images Van Der Drift embarked on a process of co-creation with the Waikato River to create latent photographic images on colour negative emulsion over the period of a lunar cycle. The Waikato River was in pre-contact times a pristine waterway running through hectares of 2000 year old Kahikatea trees on the Hauraki plains. The environment here is now in serious decline. The trees have all long ago been milled for European timber, and the surrounding fields and man-made canals contain many times the maximum safe levels of excrement, hormones and other by-products of New Zealand's dairy industry. Each large-scale painterly print is made from a scanned 5x4 colour negative piece of film that has been immersed in the silty depths of the river for a month, where all the traces of human and other-than-human life can coalesce. The indexical nature of Van Der Drifts work indicates a documentary methodology; however the visual outcomes extends beyond this into poetic, visionary expressions of human and other than human entanglements.

Clare Hewitt is an artist and academic situated in the U.K: Clare's most recent body of work, *everything in the forest is the forest* visualises the multiplicity and connective entanglements of the forest ecology as a model for human inter-connectedness. This project has emerged out of a long-form collaboration with a set of oak trees, and her outputs utilise both scientific and poetic methodologies. Among her strategies for image production are the installation of a set of pinhole cameras high in the tree canopy, where the oaks can "photograph" each other over long periods of time from an other-than-human vantage point. Hewitt has also produced a large-scale installation of individual fragments of plant material, created using the camera-less lumen-print method, itself prone to the vagaries of an unfixed photographic process. She uses scientific imaging devices to reveal the tangled world within the soil, but at depths for which the process is not designed, and creates the conditions for animals and birds to trigger their own "selfies", with no human intervention in these "decisive moments". Hewitt's work weaves

[1] Ibid.

dialogues between new and old photographic technologies; her selections of tool and process allow an ongoing reciprocity of agency between human and other than human authorship.

Becky Nunes: In my own recent work I have been exploring the pseudo-scientific process of chromatography, in a series of site-specific *Soil Portraits*. This lens-less process of photographic representation utilises silver nitrate solution to “fix” the circular image of the bio-components of soil samples into a sheet of filter paper. The resulting iris-like properties of the soil portrait can be “read” to determine degrees of bio-active ingredients in the soil; the life-force of the soil can be visually observed. In this latest work I have installed chroma portraits taken from soil samples at the tree base in three sites, and transferred the resulting images using a dye-sublimation process in order to enlarge them. The chromatograph contains in its circular & striated form, connections with the human eye, with sunspots & tree rings. These connotations allow the viewer to experience some of the entangled enchantment of something as overlooked as the ground beneath their feet. The works have been installed at each site as part of a collaborative intervention by PLACE Collective artists during a four-day forest festival. Visitors were invited to walk with the artists to each site, and engage in conversation about the resonance of the works in the space.

Part 5: Conclusion.

To conclude, in my research I am interested in exploring the overlapping and interdisciplinary potential of tools such as environmental science, indigenous knowledge, philosophy and art. Through these methodologies I suggest that lens-based practitioners can operate in ways that do not perpetuate ocular violence upon their other-than-human subjects. Rather, their outcomes can advocate & mobilise for a greater respect and care for our environment.

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