

Clouded vision: contemporary strategies of photographic representation as acts of planetary alliance

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Part 1: Our entangled existence

Humankind is experiencing an existential poly-crisis. Despite years of warnings, we as a species continue to consume and discard the natural elements of the planet at a voracious and unsustainable rate. Scientists articulate frustration and despair at our seeming inability to acknowledge this unfolding disaster. The Western extractivist framing of planetary elements as “resources” conceptualized during the period of Enlightenment is enabled through an Anthropocentric vision of the universe centring human existence while disenfranchising all other-than-human existences.

Photographic processes of representation, especially those grounded in a documentary methodology, have been employed as a central tool in cataloguing taxonomies of subjecthood as possession. This essay proposes a recalibration of this acquisitional vision as one of the processes required for mitigation of the climate emergency. To de-centre our human experience, we must extend citizenship to the other-than-human elements of our planet, re-establishing the ecological balance of our relationship. Human and other-than-human existence is inextricably bound together, entangled as Merlin Sheldrake describes it in his seminal work on fungi and mushrooms (Sheldrake 2021). A visible citizenship requires new forms of expression, enabling audiences to reimagine these ecological entanglements and responsibilities of care.

Ariella Azoulay, an important author, curator, and theorist of photography and visual culture, argues for ethical “witnessing” through the viewing of a photographic image (Azoulay 2021). If we are to build on this acknowledgment and honouring of our non-human kin, it seems plausible that first, we must truly “see” them (Azoulay 2021). How can a documentary practice employing photographic representation avoid rendering its subjects fully visible and thus exposing them to a possessive and colonizing gaze? Can visual artists represent landscapes through a protective partial opacity

of care? (Balsom 2017). Through various processes of lens-based and lens-less photographic imaging, many contemporary practitioners aim to offer insight and alliance to the more-than-human citizens of the world. In this essay, I have gathered the methodologies of a selection of artists from both the Global South and North who are utilizing these strategies. Their work acknowledges the complicated relationships woven between photo-filmic technologies and the subjects of our human gaze.

It is important here to acknowledge my own standpoint: as an intersectional feminist and tau-iwi or non-indigenous person committed to issues circulating around land rights and use, and as a lens-based artist struggling with the ethical implications of photo-filmic representation. I am constantly learning from and indebted to the wisdom, generosity, and insights offered by indigenous practitioners and elders. However, it is not the intention of this essay to offer a survey of the profound and polyphonic contemporary indigenous practices of resistance. Rather, the aim is to highlight examples of artists “staying with the trouble” (Haraway 2016) who are working in alliance with ecologies and with anti-imperial decolonizing principles.

Part 2: Photography and the violence of vision

Photography is inextricably bound through theory and practice to the notion of visual proof or “making visible,” and the implications and impacts of becoming visible are not universally positive. Pre-dating its actualization 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 the development of the negative or print and that required to prevent it from degrading are “stop” and “fix.” This process of fixing the photographic subject has been described in evidential, indexical, and melancholic terms by a variety of theorists. French writer 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 American photography theorist 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 (Sontag 2002). Photographs contain within their fixed nature the potential to re-inscribe that trauma.

As an example, we can consider the daguerreotypes commissioned by racist academic Louis Agassiz, forcibly stripping and photographing the enslaved persons Alfred, Renty, Delia, Jack, Jem, Drana, and Fassena. 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 labour on stolen Indigenous land” (Aggarwal-Schifellite 2020, my emphasis). However, since 1976 when the images resurfaced, 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 successfully worked to depose Agassiz and instead to raise up the names of those he subjugated.

These tensions and complexities characterize the medium of photography and permeate its histories. The ethics of photographic representation of human subjects has been extensively reconsidered; 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 and prejudices, recognizing photography’s function as “an active agent of Western colonizing authority” (Sealy 2014). In responding to these ethical concerns, several methodologies have emerged that reposition the photographer in relation to the human subject; through practices of collaboration, co-authorship, long-form and embedded participation in the communities, and through participatory art practices.

But how do we begin to think through the corresponding problems of colonizing representation when considering 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 ongoing Western project of enclosure, privatization, invasion, and commodification. These strategies of visual colonization have included a continuation of sublime and picturesque traditions that situate our environment as separate from ourselves. Photographic apparatuses have been complicit in early land survey photographs, aerial reconnaissance and surveillance images, ruin-porn, and the online circulation of travel & landscape imagery as records of conspicuous consumption. It could be said that the epic scale, god’s-eye perspective (Haraway 2016, 53–72), and forensic detail deployed in landscape photographs made by lens-based artists such as Edward Burtynsky, although intended to depict human-generated trauma on the land, in fact, operate more as an apocalyptic Techno-Sublime; re-situating us at a disjunct from nature, where the photographic record of pollution operates as spectacle. However, some

practitioners are labouring to re-situate themselves in more embodied relations to notions of subject and to forge new and reparative methodologies for documentary photographic practices.

Part 3: Occlusions of vision

Given all that we know about the camera's context and histories then, to move beyond this paranoid relationship with lens-based documentary practice and "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" (Balsom 2017,), documentary practitioners must pay close attention to the methodologies with which the camera is aligned.

Édouard Glissant, Martinican poet and philosopher, introduced in his *Philosophie de la Relation* (Glissant 2009) the notion of a world in relation, "a relation between different people and places, animate and inanimate objects, visible and invisible forces, the air, the water, the fire, the vegetation, animals, and humans" (Diawara 2017). Being in good relation with humans and other-than-humans who differ from each other requires, says Glissant, a "right to opacity" as protection against the acquisitive and commodifying gaze of the project of the West (Glissant, 2009). 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). This concept of a relational opacity can be seen as a methodological tool for artistic practice.

How, then, can lens-based practitioners, who wish to create for and with their subjects 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 camera-less photographic imaging many are investigating degrees of visibility in relation to the more-than-human citizens of the world. It is useful to consider the relationship of their visual outputs to notions of legibility; can a photographic practice that is based on observation and documentation avoid rendering its subjects transparent, and thus exposing them to a colonising gaze, and how does that operate when that subject is other-than-human? How can strategies of opacity and empathetic "listening" (Campt 2017) be imparted to a lens-based practice? The following examples detail a range of methodological approaches employed by four contemporary artists who are exploring this protective state of partial, incomplete, or occluded vision.

Part 4: Strategies of Reparation and Re-Presentation

For some practitioners, the ethical complexities of photographic representation can be navigated through the de-centring or complete removal of the human figure from the image. Ann Shelton (b. 1967, Pākehā/Italian) is a photographic artist living and working in Aotearoa. Shelton has long eschewed human representation in her photographs as a tactic to prevent a re-inscribing 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. Silvia Federici tells us that the systematic erasure of female systems of relational knowledge perpetrated through witch-hunts laid the foundations for a traumatic and catastrophic re-making of the feminine archetype (Federici 2018). Shelton's photographs and the conceptual frameworks of performance, installation, and literature that she weaves around them are testimony to the traumatic consequences for both female and plant protagonists of industrializing capitalist and colonizing forces. Shelton's practice is underpinned by extensive research, which is brought together in her new publication *Worm Root Wort & Bane*.

Fig. 1: *She could lie on her back and sink* (ginger, imbir, Asian ginger, zingiber), 2022. Archival giclée print on Hahnemühle bamboo, 840 × 1119 mm. Courtesy of the artist and Two Rooms Gallery, Auckland, Aotearoa, New Zealand.



In the series of images that make up *i am an old phenomenon*, she concocts dense layers of visual references to the processes by which women worked with botanical properties. These semi-opaque layers of seductive photographic surface draw us in; for example, the image *She Could Lie on Her Back and Sink (ginger imbir Asian ginger zingiber)*, 2022. (Fig. 1). The watery depths of the image contain partially submerged leaves and tubers of ginger pushing up from the green and cloudy negative space in the centre of the image. The title connects the image with the traumatic history of “swimming the witch,” where both trial and punishment were combined in the witch-hunts of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Ginger, the plant shown either drowning or rising in the image, has many medicinal properties, not least the reduction of morning sickness in pregnant women.

In the bodies of work *Jane Says, A Lover’s Herbal*, and *i am an old phenomenon*, Shelton utilizes botanical stand-ins for the representation of erased and marginalized human narratives and plant knowledge. 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 to “see” the invisible, marginalized, and persecuted women she summons through her beautifully crafted and staged images. These works displace the human figure and foreground the plants, herbs, and flowers as primary carriers of meaning. Shelton grows, tends, and harvests these plant protagonists from her own biodynamic garden. Her large-format lush images make manifest ancient plant knowledge that existed before and beyond the commodification of the natural world.

Shelton employs varying degrees of abstraction in her still-life images, weaving a visual magical-realist narrative from the formal elements she carefully composes and delineates. In the lens-based practice of UK artist and academic Clare Hewitt, we can see a similar visual push and pull between figurative representation, discernible narrative, and formal abstractions. Where Shelton retains tight control over the construction of each image throughout the process, however, Hewitt sets the parameters for making the work and then “steps aside” to allow the actions of the other-than-human world to direct the visual outcomes. Hewitt’s most recent body of work, *Everything in the Forest is the Forest*, visualizes the multiplicity and connective entanglements of the forest ecology as a model for human interconnectedness. This project has emerged out of a long-form collaboration with a set of oak trees, and her outputs utilize 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 extended periods of time from an other-than-human

vantage point. (Fig. 2). Hewitt has also co-produced with a local community 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. This installation relied on collaboration with other community members who came together during the pandemic to combat loneliness through a reconnection with nature. 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 an image capture with no human intervention in these “decisive moments.” The resulting images lack a scientific sharpness; this is not “data” but more a series of ephemeral traces glimpsed through a portal into a world separate from our own, one that teems with non-human life. Hewitt’s work weaves 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.

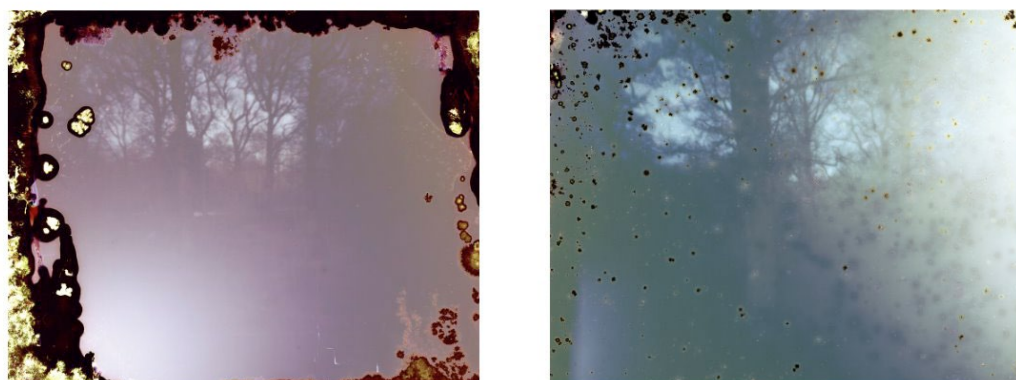


Fig. 2. From *Everything in the forest is the forest*. ©Clare Hewitt. 2020-ongoing

When thinking about degrees of legibility in relation to the meaning carried by the pictorial surface of a photographic image, I now turn to the work of Kate van der Drift (b. 1985). Van der Drift is a settler practitioner living and working in Aotearoa. Through her ongoing practice, van der Drift engages with her own positionality in relation to settler histories and the colonization of the landscapes of Te-Ika-a-Māui (The North Island). In the series *Sweet & Sour* and *Directional Listening: Fluvial Field Notes*, (Fig. 3) van der Drift embarked on a process of co-creation with the Piako River to create latent photographic images on colour negative emulsion over the period of a lunar cycle. The Piako River was in pre-settler times a pristine waterway running through hectares of 2000-year-old Kahikatea trees and wetland on the Hauraki plains (Taupaki 2021). The environment here is now in serious decline. The trees have all long ago been milled

for European timber, and the surrounding fields and human-built canals contain many times the maximum safe levels of excrement, hormones, and other by-products of New Zealand's dairy industry. In these acts of co-creation, a scanned 5x4 colour negative piece of film has been immersed in the silty depths of the river for a month, and on the emulsion surface, all the traces of human and other-than-human life can coalesce. These camera-less images are made, as van der Drift states, as "direct interaction between a photosensitive surface and the world" (Wilkinson 2024).



Fig. 3: *Waxing Gibbous to Waxing Crescent, October 2020 II, 37°20'33.4"S 175°30'30.5"E. © Kate van Der Drift. 2021*

The indexical nature of van der Drift's work, as suggested by her scientific-sounding captions, suggests a documentary methodology; however, the abstract visual outcomes extend beyond direct representational cataloguing into poetic visionary expressions of human and other-than-human entanglements. There is no clearly visible "landscape" here. The actions of the river, the chemical interactions of photographic emulsion, natural and anthropogenic elements describe their own states in a visual language that eludes such problematic terms of reference.

Finally, in my own recent work, I have been exploring the semi-scientific process of chromatography in a series of site-specific *Soil Portraits*. (Fig. 4). Chromatographs

are a semi-scientific process designed to visualize the biodynamic health or otherwise of a soil sample through the particular striations manifested as it disperses across an absorbent field. This process can be utilized in non-scientific and community settings as a participatory tool for engagement with the land, although results can be variable and not universally acknowledged as accurate. In this way, the process has much in common with other processes of artmaking and of magic. This lens-less process of photographic representation utilizes silver nitrate solution to impermanently “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 work, chroma portraits are made from soil samples at the tree base in three sites, and the resulting images transferred using a dye-sublimation process to enlarge them. Each chromatograph contains in its circular and striated form connections with the human eye, with sunspots, and with tree rings. These connotations allow the viewer to experience some of the entangled enchantment of the often-overlooked ground beneath their feet. The works are then installed at each tree site as part of a collaborative intervention. Visitors are invited to walk to each soil site and to talk and think about the symbiotic relationships happening between tree root and mycelial web out of sight below the ground. This reciprocal conversation aims to seed empathy and wonder in each viewer to take back to their own relationship with nature.



Fig. 4: *Soil+Oak portrait, National Forest, Swadlincote, July 2023*
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Part 5: Conclusion

This essay has considered some of the historical, ethical, and philosophical baggage of photography in relation to documentary practices. It has acknowledged the ethical minefield that a documentary lens-based practitioner must traverse when making work in entanglement with our planetary relations. The stakes are high. I suggest that in these urgent times of climate emergency, it is necessary to make visible that which we are at risk of losing. In leaning on Haraway, Glissant, and Balsom, amongst other writers and thinkers, I suggest a philosophical framework of opacity and alliance for the interdisciplinary operation of environmental sciences, non-Western knowledge, feminist and decolonizing practices. I suggest that we utilize photographic approaches that shield the subject from becoming framed as a commodity, whilst allowing audiences to engage with and celebrate the existence of our other-than-human relations. The visual outcomes of these strategies offer new ecological imaginaries whose affect can catalyse empathy and ally-ship in audiences.

Through the development and deployment of these methodologies, I suggest that practitioners can operate in ways that do not perpetuate ocular violence upon their other-than-human subjects. Rather, these artistic outcomes can advocate and mobilize for greater respect and care for the planetary commons on which we all rely.

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