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Abstract

The craze for carte-de-visite portraits in the early 1860s established photography as an intensely social practice. As cartes were bought, gifted, traded, archived, and displayed, they captured and created social networks. This article asks what we can learn about the social language and networks of early photography by turning instead to amateur photography, specifically women’s amateur efforts. In 1863, a group of elegant women gathered in a makeshift photography studio at Pitfour, a huge country house outside Aberdeen. Using curios from the estate as props, they created playful staged photographs. Two of the most striking ones involve a huge fur blanket inventively deployed as a symbol of sensuality and power. In their collaborative creation and circulation in various albums made by the participants, the photographs offer an early example of women’s use of photography to create and archive a shared language and experience. However, the presence of this huge bear fur at a Scottish estate is a reminder that the images, the albums, and the women who created them must also be considered in the wider imperial context. This article maps the social production and circulation of the Pitfour photographs in order to consider the tension between progressive early uses of photography and the often-repressive contexts that shaped that work.

This article is accompanied by a digital facsimile, produced for British Art Studies by the Archive of Modern Conflict, of a photographic album assembled by Georgina Ferguson at Pitfour Estate in the 1860s. It appears in the Conclusion (Fig. 33).

Authors

Acknowledgements

This research would not have been possible without the kind assistance and generous insights of Lizzie Powell and Timothy Prus at the Archive of Modern Conflict in London. In Scotland, Judith Legg in the Local Studies Collection of the Aberdeenshire libraries and Jan Smith in Special Collections at the
University of Aberdeen helped me locate what remains of the Pitfour estate and Ferguson family legacies. I would also like to extend my thanks to the anonymous reviewers and editors of *British Art Studies*, whose suggestions significantly strengthened this article.

**Cite as**

In a strikingly intimate photograph, five women gather on a floor under an enormous cascade of fur (Fig. 1). The fur has been pulled up to their necks, or in one case over the bottom of her face, bodies nestled as close as their Victorian dresses would allow. The precarious arrangement of bodies is supported by a simple wooden chair at the centre. Not everyone looks comfortable and two women look off to the left. The youngest two women flank the group and they look dutifully, if warily, at the photographer. Only the woman in the centre stares confidently ahead, head held high. Another image of the same group has a more relaxed feel (Fig. 2). Three of the women sit on the now splayed-out fur with books in hand while a fourth sits on the chair, white kerchief on her head and holding a long-barrelled gun resting on top of the fur draped across her lap. As in the first image, the figure at the centre is Nina Ferguson (b. 1842), who stands above the group looking down with a faint smile.

**Figure 1.**
Women in fur, from the Georgina Ferguson Album, 1863. Archive of Modern Conflict. Digital image courtesy of AMC Collection (all rights reserved).
Figure 2.
Women with fur and a gun, from the Georgina Ferguson Album, 1863. Archive of Modern Conflict. Digital image courtesy of AMC Collection (all rights reserved).
The unusual photographs were produced in 1863 in an early, makeshift home studio in a fifty-two-room mansion on a sprawling Scottish country estate owned by Nina’s in-laws, an estate her husband, George Arthur Ferguson, would soon inherit (Fig. 3). Like most society families of the era, the Fergusons’ main residence was in London—a large house on Berkeley Square. Only when parliament was not sitting would the social activities of high society move to country estates. During the seasons when elegant visitors made their way to remote Pitfour, north of Aberdeen, the studio served as an invitation of sorts, a space to play. The production of these images and dozens of others in the Fergusons’ own domain means they would not have been subject to the time constraints or norms of a commercial studio or even the aesthetic and conceptual demands of art. The resulting Pitfour images were not intended for public display, but nor were they completely private. Instead, they were objects to be shared with participants as tokens of friendship, added to albums which would, in turn, be shared with family and friends.

In their creation and circulation in albums, the Pitfour images offer an early example of photography as a collaborative, social, and creative activity. Many amateur and art photographers of the era, including Lewis Carroll and Julia Margaret Cameron, encouraged sitters to act out literary or historical scenes for the camera. In the fur images, Nina, her sister Mary Hood (b. 1846), and their friends Lady Julia Holmesdale (b. 1844), Miss Katie Stapleton, and Lady Mary Filmer (b. 1838) appear to be forging their own more inventive narratives using props drawn from imperial curios found at...
Pitfour. In the second fur image, the women mimic, and perhaps mock, appropriate Victorian pursuits for women: reading, caretaking, and instructing. Sequestered away in a country house studio, the women stage an intimate, playful performance for the camera that seems to undermine the limited roles assigned to them by gender and class. The fur photographs suggest efforts to not only push back against the expectations of Victorian femininity, but also to find new ways to represent the more repressed aspects of women’s lives. The sessions served as a leisure activity as well as a form of self-expression for the participants and the results appear to have been aimed at their wider social circle. The fur images and others from Pitfour sessions were archived in at least three separate albums created by women: Lady Filmer and Katie Stapleton, both pictured, and Nina’s sister-in-law Georgina Ferguson.

![Image](image.png)

**Figure 4.**

In one sense, these images and the albums that hold them are rich and novel evidence of these women’s creative and even progressive use of photography. At the same time, the images must be read within a wider imperial context. For instance, in a somewhat risqué connotation, the composition and tactile closeness of the women in the fur photographs might bring to mind John Lewis’s watercolours of harems in Egypt (Fig. 4). The Pitfour photographs also make use of guns and the remains of animals killed as a result of an insatiable European market for fur. The studio itself was housed in a mansion on a vast estate funded in part by slavery. These facts
are not, in themselves, unusual. A great deal of Victorian culture was facilitated by and made reference to signs of class privilege and empire. However, the Pitfour images provide a particularly rich context in which to consider the tension between progressive uses of photography, particularly by women, and the often-repressive contexts that shaped that work.

Photography at Pitfour

The Fergusons moved in the circles around Queen Victoria, whose fascination with photography and its myriad social uses is well established. Nina’s father, Alexander Hood, Viscount of Bridport, was the queen’s equerry at Windsor Palace and lived with his family at Cumberland Lodge on the estate. The queen had allowed Nina and George to marry at the chapel at Windsor Palace in 1860 and later Nina would go on to serve as a maid of the bedchamber. Lady Mary Filmer was closely associated with the Prince of Wales and is now celebrated for her elaborately adorned and socially adept photo-collages (Fig. 5). Katie Stapleton’s identity is less clear, but a portrait of a Lady Stapleton appears along with the fur images and others from Pitfour in an album she created for the Duffs (Lord and Lady Fife). As a group, the participants involved in creating the fur photographs were well versed in the medium. It remains unclear exactly who took the photographs at Pitfour, but the women in these photographs were voracious commissioners and creative consumers of the medium.
The most complete collection of Pitfour images is found in an album created by Nina’s sister-in-law, Georgina Harriet Ferguson (b. 1829). Georgina did not marry and had no children of her own. She was close to her older sister Frances and, when their father died in 1867, they lived and travelled together until Frances’s death in 1874. In her foundational text on Victorian illustrated and collaged photographic albums, Elizabeth Siegel cautions that albums tempt biographical readings, but they are better understood “as a practice based in Victorian feminine society and visual culture”. Most albums of the 1860s were designed to map out the creator’s specific social world and to highlight her place within it. In contrast to many who collected and compiled albums in her day, Georgina’s has no images of British royalty, actors, or other celebrities (with the exception of a photograph of the Prince of Wales with a horse, but it is an amateur shot and was taken at Cumberland Lodge). As Patrizia Di Bello notes, “Upper-class society was a fairly close and interconnected community in the 1860s, and ideas about photographs and album making would have travelled easily across drawing rooms.” Within the higher echelons, the norm for albums in the 1860s was to steer clear of pre-made albums and to artfully arrange and adorn the images. This practice was exemplified by Lady Filmer, Princess Alexandra,
and even by Lady Jocelyn, who also took her own photographs. Katie Stapleton’s album for the Fifes gestures at this expectation by cutting some of the pictures into interesting shapes and adding some pen decorations. Georgina’s album maps a social world, but it does so through often highly creative photographs—a focus on personal expression over convention. The album is a rich catalogue, a visual collection in large and small, of objects, places, and people who are woven together in a way that is more than a sum of its parts.

The first half of Georgina’s album mostly comprises photographs taken either in the Pitfour home studio or on the estate (ca. 1862-1867) interspersed with commercial carte-de-visite portraits, professional landscape views, and amateur images from elsewhere that were gifted or purchased. The pages of the album comprise neat grids of carefully trimmed photographic prints, but the pages include none of the decorative flourishes of some Victorian albums, such as artistically trimmed photographs or decorative watercolour borders. It was not unusual for albums to include various photographic genres, from portraits to landscape. However, Georgina’s carefully composed pages almost always mix photographic genres. The page that includes the second playfully posed fur photograph sits alongside more traditional portraits, a landscape, an exterior view of the estate, and a rare interior image of a room at Pitfour (Fig. 6). As a result, each page and the album as a whole suggest an integral and complex relationship between people and place. At the core is Pitfour, whose lavish buildings and grounds, servants and domesticated animals are catalogued in encyclopaedic detail, each photograph accompanied by a careful caption, but without dates or added commentary. The outdoor photographs made at Pitfour also include images of the familiar British social rituals that played out on those lands from hunting parties to picnics to choir performances. Most of the people pictured are members of Georgina’s family and guests of Pitfour, many of whom were also relations of some sort. The second half of Georgina’s album reflects her break from Pitfour after her father’s death and an inheritance that allowed the unmarried sisters to live independently. This post-1867 half of the album comprises largely commercial images purchased on a long European Grand Tour.
Figure 6.
Full page, from the Georgina Ferguson Album, 1863. Digital image courtesy of AMC Collection (all rights reserved).
Georgina, Lady Filmer, and Katie Stapleton dutifully inscribed the names of sitters in the Pitfour images, but none identify the photographer or provide a clear indication of whether she or he was a skilled amateur or a hired professional. While easier and more flexible than either the calotype or daguerreotype, wet collodion plates still had to be laboriously sensitized just ahead of taking a photograph and then developed within ten minutes, necessitating a portable darkroom—if not a permanent one. Photography was a popular hobby among the Upper Ten Thousand of British society, but even those with interest and experience sometimes hired help. In late summer 1863, a month before the fur images were made, the London-based photographer Victor Albert Prout arrived in Aberdeenshire. Prout was hired by Katie Stapleton’s friends, Lord and Lady Fife (the Duffs), to document the
annual Braemar Gathering of the Clans. The event was held at Mar Lodge, their country estate, and served as the first official visit to Scotland by the newly married and popular Prince and Princess of Wales. Prout’s task was to photograph a range of elaborate parties and social events including an evening of short plays and *tableaux vivants*, coordinated by Lewis Wingfield, a London theatre director. The performers in the *tableaux vivants* were amateurs drawn from prominent local families and Prout and Wingfield secured photographs by restaging the *tableaux* in a makeshift studio outdoors after the fact. Miss Stapleton appears in one of these images as a maid named Bobbin in a contemporary parlour comedy, “Popping the Question” looking particularly playful in a calf-length skirt with ankles exposed (Fig. 7). Within the Pitfour circle of family and friends, photography was emerging as an important aspect of social activities and as a liminal space of possibility for Victorian women.

Beyond Stapleton’s album, there are additional associations between Prout’s work in Scotland and photography at Pitfour. A panoramic photograph of Pitfour in Georgina’s album is similar in lighting and composition to those made by Prout. Knowing that the noted photographer Prout was nearby, the Fergusons may have seized the opportunity to have him make a panorama of their estate. Georgina’s album also includes several touristic landscape views of Scotland by Prout, including *The Colonel’s Bed* (Fig. 8). However, it appears that Prout’s contribution to the Pitfour album was more in terms of ideas about photography than as author of the images, especially since the images at Pitfour date from 1862–1867 and cover a wide range of seasons, visits, and events. Among these, many are technically competent, but not quite professionally composed. In an image of the Chapel, we can see neither the woman in the foreground nor the chapel well and the fence is captured flat on instead of creating a diagonal sightline through the image as per aesthetic convention (Fig. 9). Similarly, we cannot quite see the stables in the snow, but the chance to capture the effect of snow on so many objects in the garden would have been calling to anyone onsite with a camera (Fig. 10). A number of the landscape views in the Pitfour album suggest the photographer was honing their craft by looking at the work of professionals like Prout and Aberdeen’s own George Washington Wilson. The many images of the long tree-canopied roads at Pitfour echo the way Prout and Wilson often photographed through some kind of restricted space into light (Fig. 11). Copying successful photographers was a popular means of learning both what was worth photographing and how to photograph. An obituary for Wilson suggested that his views were so famous that others would regularly try to place their tripods on the same spot. In a similar vein, Stapleton’s experience with Prout at Mar Lodge may have led her, a month later, to encourage her friends to create scenes for the camera at Pitfour.
Figure 8.
Figure 9.
Chapel, from the Georgina Ferguson Album, 1863. AMC Collection. Digital image courtesy of AMC Collection (all rights reserved).

Figure 10.
Stables in the snow, from the Georgina Ferguson Album, 1863. AMC Collection. Digital image courtesy of AMC Collection (all rights reserved).
As for who might have served as the amateur family photographer at Pitfour, Georgina and Frances, the unmarried sisters, are the most likely candidates. Nina’s husband and his father were away from Pitfour when a number of photographs were made. Nina’s husband served as a colonel with the British Grenadier Guards in Montreal from 1862–1864 and, when he was at Pitfour, he appeared in many of the images. Furthermore, when the contents of Pitfour were auctioned off in 1926 after his bankruptcy and death, no nineteenth-century photographic equipment was among more than 1,300 lots that included items from kitchen supplies to furniture to saddles. The Fergusons’ social circle included women photographers. Lady Frances (Fanny) Jocelyn was a close friend and Lady of Bedchamber to Queen Victoria and friend of Lady Filmer. Jocelyn took up photography in earnest after her husband died, exhibited her work as an amateur, was elected to the Royal Photographic Society in 1859, and gave the occupation of photographer on
the 1861 census, despite being the widow of an Irish aristocrat. The Ferguson sisters had the time and scope to practise the craft, but it is Georgina who indicated a clear interest in the medium through her album. She appears in only one of the Pitfour images, a staid portrait in which her body is turned away from the camera and her face is rendered only in profile. Katie Stapleton includes this same portrait in her own album for the Duffs. Rather than embedding Georgina’s portrait with others as part of a social circle, Stapleton placed her on a page with two wintery landscapes images of Pitfour and two prints of devotional religious figures, suggesting her importance to the album may lie beyond the social (Fig. 12).

Whoever took the fur photographs and others at Pitfour was an adaptable and patient practitioner. The outdoor photographs range from small to large groups, animals and children, in full sun and in more protected spots. The makeshift indoor studio would have allowed longer sessions in winter and somewhat more control over light conditions but was created with little more than a tarp mounted in a section of a windowed arcade along one length of the house. The Pitfour photographer must also have been comfortable working in a collaborative way or in taking direction. Nina’s consistent appearances among the Pitfour photographs, as well as what was recorded of her strong personality, suggest that she was likely one of the driving forces behind the use of the studio and outdoor photography. The Pitfour photographs begin shortly after her arrival in the family and she appears in them more than any other figure. The resulting photographs often dwell, as Anne Higonnet suggests of Victorian women’s albums, “on the places of feminine sociability” and even press at the constraining boundaries of Victorian femininity. Nina is pictured in traditional Victorian feminine activities: in keeping with the ideal of the “angel in the house”, she is frequently posed with her children but she is also pictured in the act of painting or absorbed in a photo album (Figs 13–15).
Figure 12.
Katie Stapleton, Georgina Ferguson and Pitfour, in “Family Album of Lord & Lady Fife, Being Mostly Portraits”, 1860s, albumen silver print. The J. Paul Getty Museum (84.XA.620). Digital image courtesy of The J. Paul Getty Trust (CC BY 4.0).
Figure 13.
Nina Painting, from the Georgina Ferguson Album, 1863. AMC Collection. Digital image courtesy of AMC Collection (all rights reserved).
Figure 14.
Nina with a Photo Album, from the Georgina Ferguson Album, 1863. AMC Collection. Digital image courtesy of AMC Collection (all rights reserved).
Power and play are consistent themes throughout other Pitfour photographs and in Georgina’s album. Although the photographs are casual, they are necessarily staged whether in the home studio or outside. The sense of performativity around gender roles and tools of power in the Pitfour photographs seems underlined when “active” masculine roles are recreated, often awkwardly, in the home studio. Unlike most men of his class, Lady Filmer’s husband, Edmund, was known to dislike hunting and refused to partake even to please the Prince of Wales. In the Pitfour studio, he poses seated on the floor with his rifle pointed at an unseen target (Fig. 16). In many of the photographs, Nina performs traditional femininity, however, as in the fur photographs, there are significant moments where she seems to be playing with the boundaries. In one group portrait in the home studio, she is the only woman sitting at the table with men playing cards while their wives hover behind (Fig. 17). In an outdoor group shot of a hunting party, Nina is
one of few women and she holds a gun (Fig. 18). As James Ryan notes “hunting was frequently characterized as an activity in which women were not fit to participate”. Nina may well have been a regular participant in these masculine and homosocial activities, but it is particularly notable that she made a point of being photographed doing so.

Figure 16.
Edmund Filmer, from the Georgina Ferguson Album, 1863. AMC Collection. Digital image courtesy of AMC Collection (all rights reserved).
Figure 17.
Playing Cards, from the Georgina Ferguson Album, 1863. AMC Collection. Digital image courtesy of AMC Collection (all rights reserved).
Photography, Fur, and Empire

In many of the Pitfour studio photographs, the sitters employ props, material objects chosen and deployed to help craft meaning within the image. Nina’s recent travels to Canada were likely the source of both the fur and its generative possibilities as a prop. In less than two years in Montreal, the Fergusons appear to have visited the portrait studio of William Notman on at least six occasions. The famed photographer had himself arrived from Scotland less than a decade earlier and was keenly attuned to creating a uniquely Canadian experience and souvenirs for sitters. Notman regularly incorporated fur rugs and throws as props. One of Notman’s most popular standard tourist portraits offered visitors the opportunity to be pictured outside in a winter sleigh under his studio sign which read “Photographer to the Queen”. George and Nina availed themselves of this set-up and the resulting image in the Pitfour album pictures Nina with a voluminous fur sleigh robe across her lap (Fig. 19). Notman also photographed Baby George Arthur nestled in fur (Fig 20). The Fergusons even made use of Notman’s indoor “winter scenes” studio, where they posed with a sled and snowshoe with lambswool on the floor to simulate snow, sporting fashionable fur coats and hats made from a variety of animals (Fig 21).
Figure 19.
William Notman, Colonel Ferguson's Sleigh and Pair at Notman's Studio, Bleury Street, Montreal, QC, 1863, silver salts on paper mounted on paper, 8.5 x 5.6 cm. McCord Museum (I-6600.1). Digital image courtesy of McCord Museum (all rights reserved).
Figure 20.
William Notman, Mrs Colonel Ferguson's Baby, Montreal, QC, 1863, silver salts on paper mounted on paper, 8.5 x 5.6 cm. McCord Museum (I-6153.1). Digital image courtesy of McCord Museum (all rights reserved).
Fur carries long-standing associations with animality, sensuality, and power. In her cultural history of fur, Julia Emberley argues that it is an even “more complex sign of symbolic power” than historians have acknowledged. Emberley notes that fur cannot be extricated from its imperial context and its circulation as a “multi layered object, sought after for both its desirability and profitability”. 19 The historian John Richards posits that, for Canadian Indigenous peoples, the dangerous and difficult to hunt black bear was “the most respected of their prey animals”. This value pre-dates contact with Europeans and the high value placed on bearskins was further amplified by the trade in which animals become commodities. 20 That is to say that fur has acquired many of its abstract associations as the object of centuries of imperial incursions. Fur was the primary driver for European interests in
North America and the fur trade continued to significantly shape the development of Canada through the nineteenth century. Notman’s prolific use of furs at his studio was always more than a natural souvenir because fur was already a laden commodity. The fashion historian Jana Bara suggests that in 1860s Canada, fur signified the successful, if necessarily violent, pioneering spirit: “the shaggy fur overcoat became the symbol of many a man who had carved his empire out of the wilderness with his own two hands”. 21 The gender studies scholar Chantal Nadeau extends this analysis arguing that fur served as a “as political marker of imperialist domination over defeated armies and populations”. 22

The associations of bearskin with both imperialism and nationalism were made more explicit in 1815. After the British victory at Waterloo, the Grenadier Guards adopted the French military fashion for bearskin hats, a fashion that requires an entire Canadian black or brown bear pelt for each hat. As other units added the bearskin to their uniforms, the British military became a major driver of the market for bear pelts while adding to the cultural association of bear fur and power. Beaver was the anchor and driver of the North American fur trade, but by the mid-nineteenth century, tens of thousands of bear pelts had been harvested and sold to Europe for men’s and women’s hats, coats, and collars, as well as rugs and robes. By the mid-nineteenth century, overhunting led to a drop in bear populations and scarcity in the market, further enhancing the desirability of bearskin as a commodity and a symbol. 23 When the Grenadier Guards were sent to Quebec in 1861, their mission was to protect British holdings in Canada from American incursion during the American Civil War. The Grenadier Guards did not see military action in Canada, but when George Ferguson donned a bearskin in Montreal, he did so specifically in defence of the British Empire. The huge bear sleigh robe the Fergusons brought home made a fitting, if extravagant, souvenir of their time spent serving the empire, although the couple appear to have imported to Pitfour an entire Canadian sleigh in which to replay their colonial experience (Fig. 22). When Nina and her family and friends brought the bear robe into the Pitfour studio, they necessarily brought along all this interrelated imperial and mercantile history, especially when the fur was paired with a gun. The long-barrelled rifle in Katie Stapleton’s hands connects the fur images to others that play with gendered associations of hunting and military service. However, by the 1860s, the traditional fur trade was dwindling and animal rights activism was taking shape in Britain. 24 Fur still carried powerful symbolic resonance, but Nadeau traces a shift from the “manly fur culture” of the nineteenth century towards emerging cultural associations between fur and femininity.
The preponderance of maternal images of Nina in Georgina’s album raises suggestive supplementary possibilities for interpreting the fur photographs, especially when we circle back to Nina’s recent Canadian sojourn. The longhaired fur Notman used for baby George not only marked the image as a Canadian souvenir, but also served as a tool to conceal the adult required to hold the baby still enough to be photographed, a genre now referred to as “hidden mother” photos. In Montreal, Nina posed for Notman under the fur to make her baby visible to the camera. Back at Pitfour, Nina posed with her sister and friends under the fur, barely visible themselves except as a multi-headed creature, perhaps in allusion to the inescapably animalistic process of childbearing. Lady Filmer and Nina both gave birth to their first sons in 1862. By October 1863, Nina had delivered her second child and Lady Filmer’s baby son had died. The visceral, corporeal, and psychic effect of pregnancy, childbirth, and infant mortality would seem to invite some contemplation, even if the contours are not entirely legible to us now. In her analysis of Julia Margaret Cameron’s photographs on the theme of
Madonnas, Carol Mavor turns to theorist Julia Kristeva’s 1977 essay “Stabat Mater”. Mavor draws on Kristeva’s text to try to make sense of the odd look and feel of Cameron’s Madonna pictures, to mine their tactile materiality as well as their sensuous representations of touch. Mavor argues that Cameron’s photographs explore how subjectivity is “violated by pregnancy and subverted by lactation and nurturance”. Kristeva writes forcefully and extensively about the pre-verbal space in which mother and child connect through touch, smell, and colour, but she also notes the difficulty in rendering and communicating these aspects of the maternal experience, despite how visceral and meaningful they may be. Ultimately, Mavor’s efforts to read Cameron through Kristeva offers a possible explanation for the fur photographs, both in terms of the desire to try to visually represent the maternal experience and the awkward result in which five women nestle together, under, or on a huge, musky, long-haired animal hide.

Several years after the Pitfour image was produced, Leopold von Sacher-Masoch published his hugely successful and defining story, Venus in Fur (1870). Sacher-Masoch spawned the term masochist and his story, inspired by a Titian painting, cemented associations between fur, sensuality, and power. Drawing on the long-standing and imperially heightened symbolism of fur, Sacher-Masoch wants nothing more than for a woman to don the fur cloak of power and then to debase him. When the narrator is asked about his fondness for fur, he responds:

> furs have a stimulating effect on all highly organized natures ... It is a physical stimulus which sets you tingling, and no one can wholly escape it ... The torrid zone produces more passionate characters, a heated atmosphere stimulation ... That is my explanation of the symbolic meaning which fur has acquired as the attribute of power and beauty.  

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Lady Filmer’s version of the women under the fur blanket seems to point to this more sensual reading of the first fur photograph in her album. The bottom edge of the robe in her copy has been trimmed in bright red paint, an anointment she also adds to the hair bow on the teen, newly-wed Lady Holmesdale (Fig. 23). This addition gestures to a more visceral and possibly erotic connotation for fur, which was used in the Victorian era to create merkins—pubic wigs used mainly by prostitutes. Many years later, Freud would codify this connection between fur and pubic hair in the *Interpretation of Dreams*: “the male dream of sexual excitement makes the dreamer find in the street ... The clarinette and tobacco pipe represent the approximate shape of the male sex organ, while the fur represents the pubic hair”. 29
While the specific referents remain opaque, the women used this photography session in the Pitfour studio to engage in coded visual play around power, sensuality, and perhaps maternity—topics that occupied a complicated and even taboo place among upper-class Victorian women. In this sense, we might connect Nina and the other subjects to the Countess Castiglione, who commissioned an elaborate and subversive series of self-portraits from Pierre-Louis Pierson’s Parisian studio. As Abigail Solomon-Godeau notes, “women have rarely been the authors of their own representations, either as makers or models. Prior to the twentieth century there are a few exceptions and letters, fewer in the visual arts, and virtually none in photography.” 30 Although there may be few comparative examples of individual women creating their own self-representation, the Pitfour photographs fit within a slightly wider category. Cameron’s Madonnas and Clementina Hawarden’s often playful and sometimes erotically charged images of her adolescent daughters remind us that groups of women in varying power relationships were using photography to explore new visual representations. 31 Like Castiglione’s self-portraits, the fur photographs necessarily read as ambiguous oddities. However, Solomon-Godeau argues that “the singularity of the countess’s photographs intersects with the problem of feminine self-representation”. 32 There is no traditional iconography for the representation of women’s experience of childbirth, new motherhood, and sexuality. Within this context, the fur images suggest a sustained and collective desire to devise and capture a shared, even modern, visual language of female power.

**Album of Empire**

The visual language of female power that Nina, Georgina, and the others explored through photography was frequently incisive and inventive, but it was not intersectional. In her ground-breaking text on Victorian women’s albums, Di Bello was careful to draw attention to the scope of creativity accessible by class and her insights are certainly relevant to Pitfour:

> women like Lady Filmer were less restricted by prescriptive feminine ideas than middle-class women, and never expected to confine their lives to the care of husband and children, as women from the upper classes would usually be involved in managing estate business, and domestic staff and accounts. 33
This freedom and the exciting visual work it produced enable us to write rich histories of Victorian women’s engagement with photography around women like Lady Filmer, Julia Margaret Cameron, Clementina Hawarden, and even the critic Lady Eastlake. What often remains occluded is the extent to which their class privilege was founded on or enhanced by the spoils of empire.

The photographs of imperial travels and keepsakes, like the fur robe, are only the most noticeable of the many ways Pitfour and its inhabitants were shaped by empire. Georgina’s grandfather helped create his family’s fortunes in Trinidad and Tobago leading to a post as Lieutenant-Governor of Tobago by the time he was in his early thirties (he was known as the governor to distinguish him from the other Lairds of Pitfour also named George). In the late eighteenth century, the governor was one of the island’s largest landowners and his vast sugar plantations made him a fortune through slave labour. At the end of his life, he moved back to Scotland and split his time between Edinburgh and Pitfour where, along with his brother, he used those profits to expand and build up the Pitfour estate. The governor never married, but he had fathered a son and daughter with a woman in Edinburgh and openly acknowledged them in his 1820 will in which he passed his vast estate to his illegitimate son. The heir was Georgina’s father, known as the Admiral, in light of his military career. At that time, his property included about 30,000 acres of land acquired over many years to create the Pitfour estate as well as the West Indian sugar plantations and slaves. By the time the Admiral became the fifth Lord Pitfour in 1820 at the age of 31, he was already in significant debt. Over his lifetime, he did an impressive job of further eroding the wealth built up by the four Lairds who preceded him through a combination of high living, gambling, and constant and elaborate building activity at Pitfour. After inheriting the estate and its vast fortune in 1820, Georgina’s father completely reworked the mansion house adding, as one local historian described it, “an imposing entrance above which was built a large Studio, with glass frontage, which housed a number of pieces of sculpture” (see Fig. 3). In addition to the usual outbuildings such as the stables and chapel, he built an engineered race course running for miles through the grounds, an observatory, a riding school that could double as a ballroom, multiple lakes stocked with fish, fountains, and even a scaled-down replica of a Greek temple where he is said to have kept alligators (Fig. 24).
The only significant sources of income the Admiral added to his household came through marriage and the sale of people and land. His first wife was a wealthy heiress from Hereford whose father had provided an annual annuity as part of her dowry. After she died giving birth to their first daughter, the Admiral married Georgina’s mother, Elizabeth, who also brought significant wealth to Pitfour. The Admiral sought out further compensation in anticipation of the abolition of slavery. In May 1836, he received £5,724 when the British government settled his claim regarding 299 slaves in Tobago. The Tobago estate was not profitable without slavery and Georgina’s father, and later her brother, let it fall to ruin before it was sold in the 1870s. At his death in 1867, the Admiral left his son, Nina’s husband George, with £250,000 in debts against the property and little in the way of skill or temperament to turn the tide. Pitfour would eventually fall to ruin as well.

There are no photographs of the West Indies in Georgina’s album. However, Edward Said’s method of “contrapunctual reading” suggests the importance of understanding British culture through the structural lens of empire. In this framework, the Ferguson album serves as a transatlantic photographic representation of the after-effect of sugar and slavery. It serves as a catalogue of the spoils of empire well beyond the fur robe. While the album’s landscape views of the estate strive for aesthetic effect, they also serve as an extensive record of the family’s land holdings. The photographs that picture sport and social activities over top of these lands remind us that owning land is an entitlement to do as one wishes in that place. At Pitfour, as on many Victorian British estates, that meant exerting power on a regular
basis through hunting and fishing. Georgina’s album archives these acts by including not just pictures of hunting parties, but also of their bounty including photographs of a dead fox, rabbit, and birds, and an image of two male guests reclining with deer carcasses (Figs 25–27).

**Figure 25.**
Dead Fox, from the Georgina Ferguson Album, 1863. AMC Collection. Digital image courtesy of AMC Collection (all rights reserved).

**Figure 26.**
Rabbit and Birds, from the Georgina Ferguson Album, 1863. AMC Collection. Digital image courtesy of AMC Collection (all rights reserved).
In her analysis of photography post-slavery in nineteenth-century Jamaica, Krista Thompson traces the prevalence of images best described as indulging in a touristic enjoyment of labour. She notes that these photographs recast hard physical labour as beatific, a perspective made possible by the time and space land owners and visitors had to observe this labour. Across the Atlantic, the Ferguson album also presents labour in a similar light. The local Aberdeenshire historian Duncan Harley estimates that in the mid-nineteenth century, Pitfour must have required more than 100 employees, in addition to the hundreds of tenants farming the land. Georgina’s album includes a number of photographs of individual workers, although never the scale of support that must have been used. In some images, they are abstract figures who form part of the landscape such as the single groundskeeper basked in light as he works along the road towards the Chapel or the figure working in snow (Figs 28 and 29). Under both these images, Georgina has inscribed the location on the estate but not the name of the worker. However, more specialized labourers are individualized and identified in the album. Keepers pose with their gear and rough clothes in the studio or with hunting parties (Figs 30 and 18). Nannies stand with the children and their donkey, Solomon, in the gardens (Fig. 31). Workers are either pictured as part of the landscape or framed as part of the family circle. Nina poses in front of the chapel with the choir, presumably composed of the staff and tenants (Fig. 32).
Representing hired labour photographically, as either aesthetically pleasing or within the leisure activity of posing for the camera, whitewashes the vast scale of labour required and the source of the wealth so lavishly mapped in the album. The former Tobago plantation run by enslaved labour is part of the missing memory that explains and historicizes this Pitfour album and the family story it tells.

Figure 28.
Groundskeeper and Chapel, from the Georgina Ferguson Album, 1863. AMC Collection. Digital image courtesy of AMC Collection (all rights reserved).
Figure 29.  
The East Garden in Snow, from the Georgina Ferguson Album, 1863. AMC Collection. Digital image courtesy of AMC Collection (all rights reserved).
Figure 30.
Gameskeepers, from the Georgina Ferguson Album, 1863. AMC Collection. Digital image courtesy of AMC Collection (all rights reserved).
Figure 31.
Nannies, Donkey and Children, from the Georgina Ferguson Album, 1863. AMC Collection. Digital image courtesy of AMC Collection (all rights reserved).
Like the images of labour, the fur photographs point back to empire, resource extraction, and hubristic efforts to display mastery over nature. As extravagant as the fur robe might have been outside of the frigid and long Quebec winters, the colonial bounty that appears in the Pitfour photographs was just a tiny fraction of the trophies found at the estate. The “curios” section of the 1926 Pitfour sale catalogue includes not just the Canadian souvenirs seen in the album, but also a stuffed alligator, armadillo, snakes, lizards, rhinoceros’ horns, twelve sets of multiple mounted deer horns, at least twelve cases of stuffed birds, along with dozens of unidentified mounted heads and horns. The weapons used to arrest these animals were also on display. There were dozens of African spears and shields, swords, “native” arrows and spears, Turkish knives, guns, and “aboriginal” weapons. Beyond the time in Montreal and regular winter trips to the south of France, there is little evidence that the Fergusons travelled, which renders this violent display of imperial might entirely performative. In turn, the house décor provides an even darker frame for the deployment of the fur as a symbol of power in the studio photographs. At Pitfour, domesticated animals were under control, as the photographs of the children’s donkey and Captain Byng’s dog attest, and wild animals were trophies of power.
From the giant fur to the enormous scale of the mansion and the estate, the Pitfour photographs provide lasting evidence of voracious consumption on the local level. In turn, the documentation and even celebration of voracious consumption in the photographs suggest how the decisions seen at Pitfour echoed across the Atlantic. Almost all the wooden furniture at Pitfour—enormous wardrobes, dressers, washstands—were made of mahogany. Jamaica was the source of most of the nineteenth-century mahogany brought to Britain—a trade that decimated the mahogany forests by the end of the nineteenth century. In both Tobago and Scotland, Georgina’s family sucked all the capital they could from their lands. When the other inhabitants called for a fairer share of the bounty, whether they were enslaved peoples in Tobago or the tenants on the Scottish estate, the Fergusons, like so many in power, never shifted course from extractivism to find a sustainable solution in a new economic framework. In Tobago, they took the government handout for the sale of their slaves, did not reinvest in the estate, and eventually abandoned it completely. As their debts grew and lease rates fell in Scotland, they just sold off the land to sustain their lifestyle but not to pay down their debts. The mansion house was destroyed shortly after the 1926 contents sale and, according to local lore, the stones were transported to Aberdeen to construct a housing estate. After 30,000 acres and a 52-room stone mansion, the most tangible surviving records of the Ferguson family legacy are the thin albumen print photographs lodged in women’s albums. Far from being a sideline observer to these destructive trends, Nina’s gambling debts are said to have led her to direct estate staff to clear-cut an entire small forest at Pitfour in order to sell the timber. Georgina likely had little say in decisions about Pitfour and its rapidly diminishing fortunes, but she lived there in season until her father died and then she received an annuity from the estate that enabled her to live a long, comfortable, and independent life. Her album likely passed through the family in the twentieth century before being acquired by the Archive of Modern Conflict at auction.

Conclusion

The Pitfour photographs provide an invitation to weave together these seemingly disparate histories and places (Fig. 33). Their production and circulation can enrich and complicate our understanding of women’s engagement with photography in mid-nineteenth century Britain. As the fur photographs demonstrate, domestic studios offered a space for creative play that, in turn, catalysed and documented complex relationships between people, objects, and places. Furthermore, the archiving practices of Georgina, Lady Filmer, and Katie Stapleton served as efforts to assert power and authorship and to articulate the relationship between a modern sense of self and wider society. In this sense, the Pitfour photographs foreshadow the use of the handheld camera at the end of the nineteenth century, the photo
booth of the mid-twentieth century, and eventually social media. The challenge now is to develop our understanding and appreciation of these photographs and their collection into albums in ways that are cognisant of their global, imperial formation.

View this illustration online

**Figure 33.**
The Georgina Ferguson Album, 1863. Archive of Modern Conflict. Digital image courtesy of Archive of Modern Conflict (all rights reserved).

**Footnotes**

1. Lady Filmer dates the image to October 1863. Although Nina and George Ferguson were posted with the Grenadier Guards in Montreal from 1862–1864, it seems as though at least Nina returned to Pitfour in the spring of 1863. Georgina’s album includes a portrait dated 1863 taken in the Pitfour studio of Nina with a very young baby Frank who was born in Montreal in June 1863 (see Fig. 13).

2. See Anonymous, *The Private Life of the Queen by a Member of her Household* (New York: D. Appleton & Co, 1897), 119. In the tell-all, published shortly before Queen Victoria’s death, her purported former staff member reports the queen’s insistence on being photographed in every activity from sitting in a favourite chair to eating outside. He or she also reports on the queen’s rather quirky predilection for having every possession in her homes photographed and set in albums, albums she is said to have revisited often. This activity was centred at Windsor Castle, where her main photographic studio and developing rooms were located, but also extended to Balmoral.


6. Christopher Simon Sykes’ survey of British country house photography suggests the types and range of photographs taken at Pitfour were entirely in keeping with the norms of the day. These norms were stoked by the tight social and family connections between the inhabitants of such homes and the regular circulation of people, images, and albums. See Christopher Simon Sykes, *Country House Camera* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1980), 17–19.

7. Beginning in the mid-1850s, the queen used photography to document the buildings, grounds, and vistas of her estates including Windsor Castle and Balmoral. See Anne M. Lyden et al., *A Royal Passion: Queen Victoria and Photography*. (Los Angeles, CA: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2014).

8. Lord and Lady Kinnaird of the Roissi Priory, Scotland, became interested in photography in its earliest phase, experimenting with the help of scientifically inclined friends with modest success. In 1861, they hired the photographer Thomas Cummings for what was likely a season of house parties. In their history of Scottish photography, Sara Stevenson and Alison Morrison-Low report that when Cummings accepted the Kinnaird’s offer, he stipulated his “charge for 26 working days would be 25 pounds” with the employers providing all the chemicals. See Sara Stevenson and Alison D. Morrison-Low, *Scottish Photography: The First Thirty Years* (Glasgow: National Museum of Scotland, 2015), 186. Queen Victoria and Prince Albert instructed their sons’ tutor, Dr Ernest Becker, to learn photography and to oversee photographic activities for them and to step in as a photographer when needed.


10. Joan Osmond indicates that Prout received only one other commission from his work at Mar Lodge and does not mention Pitfour, but she acknowledges that documentation of Prout’s work is limited. See Joan Osmond, *Víctor Albert Prout: A Mid-Victorian Photographer* (1835–1877) (Essex: J&A Osmond, 2013).

11. The image in Georgina’s album appears to be one half of a stereograph given the small size and curved upper corners. Prout not only adapted a camera to create panoramic images but he also converted a boat into a darkroom in order to produce a handsome book of landscape scenes taken from the Thames.


Lest we wonder why Georgina would not have exhibited or otherwise connected her name to these photographs, the experience of “The Ladies Nevill” may have given her pause. Henrietta, Caroline, and Augusta made portraits of their aristocratic family. In the 1854 exhibition of the Photographic Society in London, the sisters exhibited jointly and must have been stung by the review in the Athenaeum, which sniped that their portraits “report to us the improved employment of their leisure by some members of the aristocracy of the present day”. Quoted in Grace Seiberling and Carolyn Bloore, *Amateurs, Photography, and the Mid-Victorian Imagination* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 139.


Edmund Beversham Filmer was born on 9 August 1862 and died in February 1863. The Filmers remained childless until 1869.

Mavor, *Pleasures Taken*, 61.


In 2008, it was estimated that massive transfer of wealth to Georgina’s father in 1820 was equivalent to about £30 million in modern terms. A.R. Buchan and Buchan Field Club, *Pitfour: “The Blenheim of the North”* (Peterhead: Buchan Field Club, 2008).

See J. Wilson Smith, *Pictures of Pitfour: Being a History of the Fergusons, Lairds of Pitfour*. 4 vols, unpublished manuscript, 1942, Aberdeen Library. According to Wilson Smith, Georgina’s father built the studio and some of the supporting columns of wood rather than iron. As a result, they rotted away by the end of the century, contributing to the miserable state of the house which was rendered uninhabitable by the early twentieth century.


According the 1855 Scottish valuation rolls, Admiral George Ferguson owned approximately 320 parcels of land in the county of Aberdeen. By 1865, this had fallen to 140 parcels. By 1875, his son held 115 parcels. Some parcels shifted in size over this time but as a whole the rolls support the story told in other documents that the Fergusons divested significantly through the mid-nineteenth century.

See Seiberling and Bloore, Amateurs, Photography, and the Mid-Victorian Imagination; and Siegel et al., Playing with Pictures.

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The Lost Cause of British Constructionism: A Two-Act Tragedy

Sam Gathercole

Abstract

This essay reflects on the demise of British constructionism. Constructionism had emerged in the 1950s, developing a socially engaged art closely aligned with post-war architecture. Its moment was not to last however, and, as discourses changed in the 1960s and 1970s, constructionism was marginalised. This essay traces social and economic shifts, but it is the changing cultural discourses—particularly those associated with critical art—that are the primary concern. This essay focuses on two case studies: one, the constructionist involvement in the Sixth Congress of the International Union of Architects in London in 1961; the other, Victor Pasmore’s work in Peterlee New Town (1955–1977). Both cases form the background for celebrated cultural interventions, by Gustav Metzger and Stuart Brisley respectively. Considered on constructionist terms and in relation to the conflicts apparent in relation to emergent critical practices, these two case studies shape an understanding of constructionism’s falling out of favour.

Authors

Cite as

Cast of Main Characters

Stuart Brisley, community (and performance) artist

Anthony Hill, constructionist artist

Kenneth Martin, constructionist artist

Mary Martin, constructionist artist

Gustav Metzger, auto-destructive artist

Victor Pasmore, constructionist artist

with Lawrence Alloway, art critic, as The Player

Prologue: Minor Characters and Dramatic Devices

On 11 April 1967, Tom Stoppard’s play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* was performed in full for the first time at the Old Vic Theatre, London. In it, Stoppard took two minor characters from William Shakespeare’s play *Hamlet* and placed them centre stage. Weaving scenes from Shakespeare’s original with imaginings of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern’s continued life outside of it, Stoppard granted attention to the margins: exits from an old drama had become entrances into a new one. Adding a number of self-conscious nods towards the work of Samuel Beckett, Stoppard shaped an absurdist, intertextual, existentialist, meta-drama.

Taking a prompt from Stoppard’s play, what follows tells a parallel or background story to that foregrounded by the recent art history engaging with critical practice. According to that history, Gustav Metzger and Stuart Brisley are the heroes of the tale about to be visited. But, instead of rehearsing the standard account, this is a story about those who have been cast as the minor characters (operating in the background or wings of Metzger and Brisley’s actions, but barely registered in the historical record of those actions). Metzger and Brisley are, thus, the Hamlets of the tale; a different group of artists—the constructionists: Anthony Hill, Kenneth Martin, Mary Martin, and Victor Pasmore—are the Rosencrantzs and the Guildensterns, doomed from the outset (as, indeed, they are in Stoppard’s play).

In relation to the action that is about to unfold, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* functions primarily as a playful device: a passage of art history is here treated as theatrical drama played out with minor characters of that history taking centre stage. There is no direct link between Stoppard’s play
and the lost cause of British constructionism. However, in its own gentle way, the play can be regarded as a marker of Western cultural discourses of the moment; discourses that directly and indirectly applied pressure to the constructionist idea that had been developed in the previous decade. On a literary front, questions were being asked about the role of the author and the originality of the creative act. ³ Stoppard’s play can be located in relation to these and numerous other critical challenges of the time, many of which addressed and intervened upon cultural canons and hierarchies, as well as the attitudes and values they upheld. ⁴ So, the play works here as prompting a particular mode of engagement with the subject, and as being representative of certain attitudes and practices that held currency in the period about to be visited, 1961–1976. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead itself deals with a number of themes that emerge in the two acts that follow: the relationship between art and life; confused agency; a crisis of identity and purpose; recruitment to an ill-defined cause; and betrayal.

As Rosencrantz and Guildenstern try to make sense of their ill-defined context in Act One of Stoppard’s play, Rosencrantz asks Guildenstern, “Shouldn’t we be doing something—constructive?” ⁵ If Gustav Metzger had been a character in the scene, the answer would have been “No! Destruction is the only appropriate course of action.”

**Exposition: Setting the Constructionist Stage**

On 3 July 1961, the pioneer of auto-destructive art Gustav Metzger arrived at the South Bank in London with subversive intent. On 5 January 1976, the performance artist Stuart Brisley arrived in Peterlee, County Durham, planning his own critical intervention. Brisley had been officially invited to Peterlee; Metzger had not been invited to the South Bank (although he had sought permissions from the organisers of the Sixth Congress of the International Union of Architects that was happening there, before angrily turning up anyway). Their respective actions were framed as something like art—Metzger and Brisley were operating as artists—but both were engaging in what they saw as urgent social/political issues: Metzger’s eye was on “capitalist values and the drive to nuclear annihilation”; ⁶ Brisley’s more localised concern was repressive bureaucracy, and what he saw as a flagrant disregard for the local community exercised by post-war New Town development corporations. As such, both maintained the historical avant-gardist intention to merge art and life: to work in direct, critical relation to society; and to influence progressive change through cultural activity.

Metzger and Brisley are here recruited to represent aspects of the new cultural strategies and critical tendencies that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s. On some fronts, critical practices took a performative turn and
explored new subjectivities; on others, critical practices worked towards
dematerialising the artwork and decentring art production. Metzger and
Brisley are but two of many agents of change at work in these years. The
broad shift in which their work participated is one that relates to
contemporaneous and, indeed, current discourses of art: a change in what
artists do, and, more significantly perhaps, a change in the meanings it is
possible to claim and find in what artists do (and had done historically). In
other words, established meanings attached to certain forms of practice
were no longer to be assumed: top–down modernist practices were giving
way to bottom–up models that, in the cases of Metzger and Brisley at least,
were critically positioned in opposition to prevailing cultural, social, and
political discourses.

What follows is not, however, a story about Metzger and Brisley: they are not
our main protagonists. Rather, this is a story about the vanguard
representatives of a fading model, and about the circumstances in which that
model was superseded. The main roles are here to be played by a loosely
organised alliance of artists (the constructionists) that had, from the early
1950s developed an abstract, formal, rationalist artistic language, and
explored its potential in relation to architecture and the wider built
environment. \(^7\) Their work was done in a post-war context that consolidated
and institutionalised the collective, equalising energies of wartime in the
form of the Welfare State. Constructionism worked in support of the Welfare
State—in relation to its emergent infrastructure and associated
superstructure. This was constructionism’s defining context, but—as the
1960s began—the context was changing. Social and political changes left the
artists increasingly in the compromised service of private interests,
hierarchical bureaucracy, and corporate capitalism. So, Metzger and Brisley
are this story’s antagonists. They are the agents named here towards a
particular purpose: their now widely celebrated activities on the South Bank
and in Peterlee took place against the backdrop of British constructionism.

Constructionism, as represented here by the artists Anthony Hill, Kenneth
Martin, Mary Martin, and Victor Pasmore, pursued a socially engaged “art of
environment” in the 1950s. \(^8\) Through statements and publications (such as
three issues of *Broadsheet* produced irregularly between 1951 and 1957, and
the book *Nine Abstract Artists* published in 1954), and in a series of group
exhibitions (such as *Artist Versus Machine* at the Building Centre in London in
1954, and *This is Tomorrow* at Whitechapel Art Gallery, London in 1956), the
constructionists foregrounded social engagement, and the environmental
implication and architectural intent of their work. \(^9\) Their exhibitions regularly
involved architects and models of collaboration. The constructionists took
these speculative models of collaboration one step further, producing work in
spaces outside those of exhibition, in, for example, new housing schemes,
new hospitals, and new schools, colleges, and universities. Through such
projects, the constructionists demonstrated in practice, as well as in their theory, a willing participation in the shaping of the public and social spaces of post-war Britain.

Constructionist work is contingent upon its immediate environment. Anthony Hill wrote of any given constructionist work as “an organisation” that “influences its surrounding context”, and “only functions in its context”. 10 It is a restrained, rational art. It was produced in conditions that ensured a degree of independence of artwork from artist in that the work has its own internal necessity. The constructionists worked in productive and creative dialogue with and between given geometrical systems and structural principles, and frequently with raw, industrial materials. The work occupied a position of depersonalised resistance to the bucolic, individualistic romanticism that prevailed in much post-war British art. It stood—figuratively and, where and when possible, literally—alongside emergent forms of modern architecture in developing what the art critic Lawrence Alloway termed “an aesthetic of the typical”. 11 This linked, in turn, with certain discourses of the Welfare State: the assertive but quiet manners of constructionism chimed with those of the New Humanism of the 1950s. New publics were being shaped through new institutional and infrastructural frameworks, and through and by new social spaces. Beyond the 1950s, however, constructionism’s manners were regarded as complicit in a more problematic culture and politics. The society produced by the Welfare State was vital in floating the possibility of a more egalitarian society constituted through new distributions of power and new forms of agency, but the energies it released developed into a range of fault lines in the 1960s.

Constructionism presented itself in line with the potentiality of post-war Britain. According to the Liberal architect of the Welfare State, William Beveridge, the post-war period would represent a “clear field” both ideologically and materially, given the scale of the reconstruction demanded by wartime destruction. 12 The question was: on what terms and in what form would Britain rebuild? For Beveridge, this was a “revolutionary moment” and thus “a time for revolutions, not for patching”. 13 And, just as the Russian constructivists had recognised a particular cultural challenge in relation to the Russian Revolution, so—in a characteristically quieter fashion and in a less tumultuous moment—the British constructionists forwarded a unified cultural and social vision. More than any other of the twentieth-century avant-gardes, constructivism (and variations such as constructionism) is reliant on conditions available in particular cultural, social, and political contexts. It does not oppose antagonistically in the way that other historical avant-garde manifestations such as Dadaism and Surrealism do. So, without a sympathetic context, constructivism flounders, and is reduced to operating in a space of artistic speculation some uncomfortable distance from its materialist ambitions.
Constructivism—and practices drawing from and associated with it—had a couple of moments in twentieth-century British art and design. In the 1930s, when Britain played host to a number of European émigré modernists, artists gathered around Barbara Hepworth and Ben Nicholson responded to modernist work and ideas. The response was singularly English however: nature prevailed over technology. The British artists were attracted to European modernism, but betrayed a less industrial mindset: theirs was a less technologically driven outlook, inclined instead to draw on natural structures; the British palette was one of secondary and tertiary colours alongside Mondrian’s primaries; in terms of materials, wood was preferred to metal. The British art was less urban, more rural in its implications: it was more a modernism of the cottage than of the tower block. This phase of British constructivism is articulated in, among other things, the 1937 anthology, *Circle: International Survey of Constructive Art*, edited by Naum Gabo and Nicholson along with the architect Leslie Martin (published in London by Faber & Faber). For the art historian Stephen Bann, *Circle* “displayed the unbridgeable gulf between the foreign exiles and the native artists”. In the 1950s, a more committed and convincing home-grown contribution to the constructive tradition emerged through constructionism. Consistent with that tradition, constructionism represented a form of praxis: theory leading to application and testing in practice that, in turn, feeds the further development of theory in an ongoing dialectical relationship. As such, British constructivism has two quite distinct phases that are neatly bookended with *Circle* at one end and the 1968 anthology (again published in London by Faber & Faber), *DATA: Directions in Art, Theory and Aesthetics*, edited by Anthony Hill, at the other. For Bann, *DATA* “helped to promote that consciousness of the constructive aesthetic as a plurality of genetically related positions”. It is here contended, however, that British constructivism was already, by 1968, in retreat if not decline; the moment, and its associated opportunities forged in the 1950s, had passed.

There is a problem locating constructivism in relation to later twentieth-century discourse. Changing and changed circumstances are certainly apparent by the time of the Arts Council’s exhibition *Pier+Ocean: Construction in the Art of the Seventies* staged at the Hayward Gallery, London in 1980. It presented the work of a diverse and international range of artists that included some obviously connected with a clearly defined constructivist attitude (Hill and the Martins among them), and others representing dematerialised and performative models of practice. The exhibition was selected by a German artist, Gerhard von Graevnitz, and his catalogue introduction outlines the difficulty of coherently representing historical and contemporaneous constructivism. The challenge pivoted on reconciling the social/political urgency of the historical artists with the aesthetic legacy of their experiments.
If Constructivism had [in the exhibition] been treated as a stylistic consensus spanning a number of different periods, then the early Constructivists’ universalist impulse to change the world would have been lost from sight. If, on the other hand, in order to point to an uninterrupted evolution, the various periods involved had been presented in an extra-artistic context—that of the aspirations of those same early revolutionaries—then the younger generation would have appeared as the degenerate heirs to a tradition which had lost its force.  

So, by 1980, constructivism was largely historical. For von Graevnitz, it had stood “at the beginning of eternity”, but was now standing “at the edge of the past”.  

Following von Graevnitz’s introduction, and functioning as an epigraph for the Pier+Ocean exhibition catalogue, is a passage from Samuel Beckett’s novel Molloy (1959). This is a first-person account of collecting “sucking stones” and distributing them in pockets so as to ensure they were circulated and sucked without repetition or omission in the rotation. The passage describes private routines and rituals. In the context of Pier+Ocean, the text signals a move away from the public discourses of the post-war period.

**Act One: The IUA Experiment**

In 1961, the constructionist group participated in the Sixth Congress of the International Union of Architects (IUA) hosted at London’s South Bank on 3–7 July. Anthony Hill, Kenneth Martin, and Mary Martin (along with a more recent associate of the group, John Ernest) produced work for the set-piece Headquarters Building. Their work for the congress can be regarded as the final significant group act of the constructionists working in relation to architecture and site-specificity. As such, it concluded nine years of collaborations that had started with a series of small, environmental exhibitions in Adrian Heath’s studio in Fitzrovia, London in 1952 and 1953 (Fig. 1). An interest in shaping an environment through architectural collaboration is apparent in the early manifestations of the group’s work, and this was maintained and developed throughout the 1950s. Mary Martin might, in 1961, have written, “The possibility of making a synthesis of art and architecture is becoming more real than it was even five years ago”, but the practical and theoretical positions rehearsed in the constructionist sections of the This is Tomorrow exhibition at Whitechapel Art Gallery five years earlier did not, it turns out, open the way to a sustained “reality”.
For his part, Kenneth Martin produced two mobiles for the IUA Congress (Figs 2 and 3). In conjunction with the event, Martin published brief and unfinished notes about his aim being “to take part in an expressive whole”.  

Each participating artist’s work was, Martin remarked, to be “considered as part of [the] function of the building which was to house the special activities of a special group of people for a few days”. Martin’s statement is a short one, but it articulates something of the (compromised) circumstances of the occasion. What might be made of his characterisation of “special” people and activities? His use of words is loaded: this was a temporary and privileged event, a significant purpose of which was to bring the architectural profession together. Another purpose, in this particular edition of the congress, was to showcase the products of private manufacturers. A “total architectural expression” had been achieved “by a group [the constructionists] bound together by a developing aesthetic”, Martin suggested. But, yearning, perhaps, for something more consequential, he went on: “at other times they may be the fruits of expression of a whole society”. In such words, we might read Martin’s recognition that the progressive, totalising social and cultural possibility of the post-war years had faded, or at least had been indefinitely deferred. The terms and conditions in which he was operating in July 1961 were some considerable
distance from earlier projects, such as an installation of Martin’s mobiles in a children’s ward at Whittington Hospital, London, in October 1953 (Figs 4 and 5). No commercial agendas were served on that occasion; instead, it was a cultural experiment in social context (engaging a different group of special people).

Figure 2.
Kenneth Martin, Twin Screws, Headquarters Building, Sixth Congress of the International Union of Architects, South Bank, London, 1961, aluminium and asbestolux, 76 cm tall and 152 cm radius. Digital image courtesy of The Estate of Kenneth and Mary Martin (all rights reserved).
Figure 3.
Kenneth Martin, Twin Screws, Headquarters Building, Sixth Congress of the International Union of Architects, South Bank, London, 1961, aluminium and asbestolux, 76 cm tall and 152 cm radius. Digital image courtesy of The Estate of Kenneth and Mary Martin (all rights reserved).
Figure 4.
Nigel Henderson, Mobiles by Kenneth Martin, installed in Ward 17 of the Whittington Hospital, London, October 1953, photograph. Tate (TGA 201011/3/1/30/1). Digital image courtesy of Nigel Henderson Estate. Photo: Tate (all rights reserved).
Gustav Metzger was also on and around the South Bank in July 1961. He used the occasion of the IUA Congress to demonstrate his “Auto-Destructive Art”. This was, according to Metzger, a new form of public art that sought a space outside of museums and galleries where “stinking fucking cigar smoking bastards” were dealing art; Metzger sought a space that withheld art from “the possession of stinking people”. 23 Metzger was outside the IUA Congress and Martin (and other constructionists) inside, but apparent oppositions between the two artists’ work and motivation are less straightforward. The form their respective works took was different, but the avant-garde attitudes and the ambitions they held were not so very different. Indeed, Metzger acknowledged the progressive position taken by twentieth-century “artists with a strong leaning to the left”, who had explored “the interaction of art, science and technology” and left “a marked effect on the mechanical and kinetic arts”. 24 He valued this as “a critical attitude towards Capitalism [that] hinders the absorption of the artist”. 25 However, cultural
conditions were changing: new spaces were opening up, others closing, and geometric abstract art was losing its critical credentials. The form of the work, the meanings it was taken to carry, and the spaces it occupied would prove decisive in terms of its critical potential. More explicitly antagonistic, Metzger’s work resisted political neutralisation through corporate recuperation. He would, for example, not have kinetic works commissioned by a shopping centre in Peterborough (New Queensgate Centre, 1982) or an office building in London (Victoria Plaza, 1984), as did Kenneth Martin. The constructionist work was being cast as innocuous at the commissioning stage.

The Sixth IUA Congress assembled representatives of the international architectural profession to consider the apparently problematic relationship between architecture and new materials and technologies. It addressed “the problem of the architect in a new technological situation”. The “problem” for architecture was a perceived loss of balance, with design being dictated to by economic factors and materials manufacture that emphasised pre-fabrication. As such, a “two-tier profession” had emerged: “one tier concerned with architecture as art, the other with building”. The feeling was that, “on the technical side, the architect is losing control to the manufacturer”. What is apparently missing from the discussion is reference to a wider social context, and the place of architecture in the service of that context: the architectural profession, it seems, was keen to reassert architecture as an art, and recover the ground it felt it had lost in the 1950s when the most radical work was being done through (socially rather than commercially driven) pre-fabrication. This had been debated in the 1950s, but the momentum in the early and mid-1950s was with social building. The task of the congress was to explore ways in which architectural control might be recovered and revitalised in line with the new conditions. To this end, the temporary buildings hosting the congress would seek to facilitate the productive collaboration of architects, artists, and manufacturers in “developing aesthetic methods of handling prefabricated pieces”. What became known as “the IUA experiment” —the commissioning of a temporary site designed by Theo Crosby (himself a veteran of This is Tomorrow), and the invitation to a range of artists to make or place work within it—was initiated and supported by three private firms: Cape Building Products Ltd. (that specialised in manufacturing asbestos), Pilkington Bros. Ltd. (glass), and the British Aluminium Company. A letter written in 1960 from P.A. Denison of Cape Building Products to Sir Harry Pilkington of Pilkington Bros. identifies an opportunity to showcase a range of material products to the international architectural profession. He proposed “an exhibit [...] to create an impact of visual stimulation”. The artist-
initiated *This is Tomorrow* this was not: instead, artists found themselves working at the behest of private sponsors, and therefore promoting their products.

Crosby’s site organised a succession of spaces that culminated in the Headquarters Building. It was here that site-specific works by Hill and the Martins were located. The Headquarters Building was the most ambitious realisation of the congress’s attempt to demonstrate the potential synthesis of a new art/architecture aesthetic and new materials manufacture. Hill and the Martins produced work that complemented Crosby’s architecture. Kenneth Martin made two large mobiles, located in the centre of Crosby’s axially planned building and suspended from Frank Newby and Dr Z.S. Makowski’s ceiling/roof of aluminium pyramids—a bravura demonstration of what can be done with only a thirty-sixth-thousandth-of-an-inch-thick metal. The ceiling set a visually cacophonous tone for the space—a tone somewhat at odds with the more restrained language of constructionism. Hill (Fig. 6) and Mary Martin (Fig. 7) produced constructed clerestory friezes, facing each other, and covering the truss between the building’s two roof levels (higher in the centre and lower either side), thus effecting a transition from one roof level to another. According to *Architectural Design*, Mary Martin’s work was the “more solid construction”, and offered one solution to the context. Hill offered another: “His was a subtle game of reflections producing an indefinite transition from one space to another.”
Figure 6.
Anthony Hill, Screen, in the Headquarters Building, Sixth Congress of the International Union of Architects, South Bank, London, 1961, aluminium, asbestolux, and glass, 213 x 1463 cm with a maximum projection of 47 cm. Digital image courtesy of The Estate of Kenneth and Mary Martin (all rights reserved).
Mary Martin, for whom the “constructive work is an integration in itself since it is painting, sculpture and architecture, inseparable”, stated that the IUA Congress “held the possibility of a mild synthesis”. The “mildness” identified here again acknowledges something of the limitations of a situation contrived by the architect (Crosby) for artists to demonstrate what they might contribute to new architecture. The relationship between artist and architect, with the artist having “complete freedom” in the space allocated by the architect, was one developed in the theoretical space of a formal exercise. The IUA Congress staged a dialogue between the architectural profession and commercial manufacturers, with artists enlisted to enrich the space of that dialogue. This is some distance from a more complex and layered synthesis coming out of collaborations involving more parties than artist and architect, and resulting in the production of social space. An example of that is Mary Martin’s work at the Nuffield House extension for Musgrave Park Hospital in Belfast in 1957 (Fig. 8). There, she collaborated with the architects Richard Llewelyn-Davies and John Weeks (with whom she had worked in This is Tomorrow a year earlier) as part of a team made up additionally of medical professionals and others including a medical historian and a sociologist. Out of this, Martin produced a constructed work, Waterfall, for the extension’s entrance.
The close relationship between Martin and Weeks had numerous outcomes, both in exhibitions and in architectural actuality. One champion of constructionism, the art critic Lawrence Alloway, celebrated the Nuffield House work as a positive alternative to more familiar ways in which art operated in relation to architecture. For Alloway, a “shaggy dog approach” that sets “rough, lumpy, or curly forms as contrasts to the real architectural scene” was being productively rivalled by a “an ‘artistic’ use of modern materials, of using the materials of engineering and architecture, without ‘utilitarian’ requirements”. At Nuffield House, the artist had adopted the measurements and proportions of the modular system determined by the architects. She also utilised the same materials used in the building itself. “Thus,” Alloway noted, “proportionally and materially [the work] is linked with the building which contains it, and both of these are clearly visible”. He goes on to say:

Mary Martin is using some of the architect’s materials, but she is using them in a special sense, freely. There is an element of play which is no less strong for staying within limits; these are, on the
contrary, the rules of the game. Her sensibility operates playfully, lyrically, within the vocabulary of building materials, but she gives the materials a different function. 40

And, drawing wider conclusions from Martin’s work, Alloway remarks: “Constructivists of all artists are least content with private and unique works of art. A keen desire to give individualistic art a social function motivates their use of ‘modern materials’.“ 41

Alloway also wrote in relation to the “IUA experiment”. In doing so, he indirectly registers some of the shifts occurring as the 1950s gave way to the 1960s. What was shifting, among other things, was the “social function” of the work. For Alloway, the “best works” at the congress (and, in Alloway’s opinion, Mary Martin’s Construction was one of these) “gave up none of their autonomy to the public occasion”. 42 What Alloway was writing about here is an artistic autonomy that seals off the inner logic of the work as well as its material object-hood from external factors. As such, according to Alloway, the “best works” asserted sovereignty over the contingent terms of context, the very contingency that the constructionists had so eagerly embraced and foregrounded in their work in the 1950s. What had been important as an environmental setting of artistic materiality and facture was slipping into a detached statement of materiality and facture. In 1954, Alloway had celebrated the grounding of language of abstract art—what he termed a shift “from eternity to here”—and its relevance to the built environment. 43 In 1961, he was arguing that the “considerable speculation” about “the possibilities of synthesis” (a synthesis of art and architecture) had given way to “scepticism about synthesis as an ideal”. 44

What is being signalled by Alloway, then, is a strategic retreat from public, social space. According to him, Martin’s work in the 1950s operated with a freedom from utility that was not available to the architect, but such art remained an integrally socially engaged and functional element within the environment. By the 1960s, that relationship was slipping, and artistic freedom was being reconfigured in terms of artistic autonomy. Or, without a social context and application, all that was left was the work’s self-determination. Alloway proceeded to effectively detheorise the work of the constructionists. 45 He wrote: “In constructivist theory, the use of modern materials precipitates the artist into a socially useful relation to 20th-century technology. This is doubtful and fortunately constructions do not need such an ambitious rationale.” 46
A similar sentiment is apparent in the catalogue for a group exhibition, *The Geometric Environment*, staged at the Artists International Association Gallery, London in 1962. The exhibition featured work by, among others, Kenneth Martin and Mary Martin, including models relating to two of their collaborations with the architect John Weeks. The catalogue text by Patrick Reyntiens disparagingly references the “remedial manifestos” associated with constructive art, and suggests that supposing that “moral retrenchment and geometric construction in art should go together” is a commonly encountered “fallacy”. Reyntiens goes on: “English constructive art has always been modest in the sense of being self-sufficient, integral, and concerned with the minimum of allusion to events or ideas outside itself.” Thus, even among its established supporters, constructionism was being stripped of social potentiality.

Anthony Hill had taken a more distant position than others in the constructionist group in relation to architecture and the built environment. He had not, unlike others in the group, worked with architects. Indeed, the team of which Hill was a part for *This is Tomorrow* was the only one in the show not to include an architect. On the relationship between art and architecture, in 1956, he wrote that “there is less to be said than might be expected”. Alongside such statements, however, Hill declared a theoretical interest “in the issue of synthesis, plastic art and architecture”, and in thinking through how plastic art might be “able to contribute positively towards the shaping of the spiritual and material outlook of our modern civilisation”. For him, a new, rationalist model emerging in post-war architectural discourses was more compelling than the individualistic subjectivities of the dominant tendencies in post-war art. In conjunction with his involvement in the IUA Congress, Hill wrote, “Good architecture is without question a more vital need for people in general than anything that is coming out of the artist’s studio; in consequence it is a more serious topic than ‘fine art’.” He went on to say that architecture:

> is now at a stage free to smile at the intense subjectivism of experimental art and replace its own subjective areas by new outlooks that render the problem entirely solvable in terms of new branches of technology, “human” engineering, etc.

Thus, Hill is contributing to the central themes of the congress: the relationship between architecture and new materials and technologies; and the status of architecture as, itself, an art. His contribution, however, remains one committed to the socially oriented functional architecture of the 1950s; he was not concerned about that architecture’s perceived lack of art.
More strongly than Mary Martin’s, but less strongly than Kenneth Martin’s, Hill’s position was one that expressed dissatisfaction with the IUA project. For him, the “experiment” was one free of risk: if it failed, the “real culprit” would be seen to be:

the architect rash enough to tackle the enterprise this way. Alternatively, if it succeeded in anybody’s view it would have to stand as an example of “aesthetic laissez faire” with the full collusion of the architect and the various sponsors who agreed to there being “an experiment” on these lines.  

With such safeguards in place and little at stake, Hill bemoans a lack of purpose. The event becomes, instead, merely “a demonstration of answers to hypothetical problems”. The progressive, social drive of the new architecture of the 1950s, that had been prepared to jettison established models of architecture as an art, was being reviewed at the IUA Congress in 1961. The profession was keen to recover previously established models.

So, what did the sponsors make of the constructionist work? P.A. Denison of Cape Building Products Ltd wrote approvingly of it, but added that he did not “feel that the experience of coming into contact with them led my imagination to immediate ways of extending their type of designing by way of our products.” He continues: “Perhaps this is because they only want the material in its ordinary form. I do not think that any of them are particularly interested in thinking of components that can be developed from the material.”

The constructionists’ use of materials as found and, through that, their advancement of Alloway’s “aesthetic of the typical”, was clearly not what the manufacturers had in mind for their products. This might be extended to reflect the yearning on the sponsors’ part (as well as that of the architectural community gathered at the congress) for a more recognisably artistic direction. Denison reserved warmer words for—and reports an ongoing dialogue with—William Turnbull, who had also produced a scheme of work for the Headquarters Building. If, as Crosby suggested, “The manufacturer is the new patron” now, making “the aesthetic as well as the technical and economic decisions”, then tastes such as those expressed by Denison signalled the way forward (without the constructionists).

Writing in the Guardian newspaper, Diana Rowntree described the IUA buildings as “a gift from three manufacturing firms”. The giving of the gift is, by implication, a power play. Rowntree went on to say: “Acceptance of this gift marks a new attitude on the part of the architectural profession”.

As post-war public service commenced its dissolution into the service of private interests, the contexts in which a socially oriented constructionism might operate evaporated also. A significant amount of what was left of the radical politics of the post-war moment moved into the new spaces of 1960s counter-culture. Pressure groups and protest groups—a politics from below, to which we will return—determined the progressive agenda. Municipal spaces of housing, health, and education remained, but the terms through which those spaces were shaped—and, particularly, how the processes and structures were understood by socially engaged, left-leaning parties—were changing. Avant-garde cultural groups, for instance, increasingly positioned themselves at a critical distance from the practical, production end of social space. The “actual creative factor” that the constructionists had recognised in “machine techniques and materials”, and “the place of abstract art in the new architecture”, that they had foregrounded in the exhibition *Artist Versus Machine* at the Building Centre in London in 1954 were seemingly less conceivable a decade later. 63 Such points had, to an extent, been revived at the IUA in 1961, but the difference between the independently, self-organised display at the Building Centre and the invitation to join a commercially sponsored event at the South Bank is significant: one (the former) is speculative; the other (the latter) is an attempted recruitment to a commercial cause.

![Figure 9.](image)


On the morning of 3 July 1961, Metzger arrived at the South Bank to demonstrate auto-destructive art (Fig. 10), and issue his third manifesto, *Auto-Destructive Art, Machine Art, Auto-Creative Art* (alongside his previous
two manifestos, on a single sheet) (Fig.11). The intention was to perform work in two phases: the first was an action in which hydrochloric acid was applied to stretched nylon sheets; and the second was a sequenced falling and breaking of panes of glass. Windy weather prevented the glass element of the demonstration.

Figure 10.
Gustav Metzger, Acid Action Painting, demonstration on 3 July 1961, South Bank, London, nylon, hydrochloric acid, and metal, 213 x 381 x 183 cm. Digital image courtesy of The Estate of Gustav Metzger. Photo: Keystone/Hulton Archive/Getty Images (all rights reserved).
Metzger’s action is known for its anti-war and anti-capitalist positioning. Metzger explicitly stated as much in his manifestos, and his use of nylon is significant on this front. As well as dissolving in a particularly dramatic way when acid is applied, nylon was historically associated with militarism and capitalism. Sven Spieker points out that as a new material developed by the US military in the Second World War (primarily for parachutes) and as the material of “women’s stockings and other items of mass-produced clothing”, nylon exemplifies “an amalgam of wartime destruction, post-war fetishised consumption and capitalist spectacle”. In addition, Metzger’s performance was taking local aim at the IUA Congress. Reflecting on the targets of his aggression, the artist said:
It was partly me attacking the system of capitalism, but inevitably also the systems of war, the warmongers, and destroying them, in a sense, symbolically. The aggression was also directed against the organisers of the International Union of Architects’ Congress, who had originally agreed to hold the demonstration, and a week before had cancelled the event.  

In terms of the antagonistic dialogues engaged by Metzger, connections can be made, not only to what was happening within the IUA Congress, but also to a wider constructionist language, particularly that of the space-frame construction. Before the demonstration itself had started, Metzger’s nylon sheets (one white, one black, one red) stretched over a metal frame, would have resembled a rudimentary space-frame construction, not unrelated to John Ernest’s Tower at the nearby entrance to the congress—itself something of a space-frame construction that utilised coloured panels held by a scaffolding framework (Fig. 12). The “space-frame”—an economical spatial articulation using orthogonally related lines and coloured planes—was, by then, a familiar form of constructionism, developed from constructivist, neoplasticist, and de Stijl antecedents. The constructionist Stephen Gilbert, for one, had produced space-frame constructions that he went on to develop as architecture, in the form of prototype houses. Metzger’s structure of stretched monochrome sheets on a standardised frame structure was a space-frame construction in basic form. A dialogue between the constructive and the destructive would have been even more apparent if Metzger’s second planned action, Construction with Glass, had been possible. Again, a metal frame provided a structure from which large glass sheets (396 x 290 cm) were to be suspended, and from which they would fall “on to the concrete ground in a pre-arranged sequence”. As such, Metzger was appropriating constructionist forms towards an “auto-destructive” event of performative sacrifice. The form was taken as a sign to be destroyed. Photographic documentation of the action barely registers the work’s formal components, instead foregrounding Metzger himself, in safety-protected form, including a full-face gas mask. This is embodied theatre, rather than the de-individualised practice of constructionism.
Figure 12.
Constructionism is implicated by Metzger’s intervention at the IUA Congress. In 1962, Mary Martin was maintaining that “real art” was “against convention, but not against society, so that it is destructive in order to be constructive”. The tense and fragile balance she sought between a society “based on convention” and a constructive art that was, by definition, she claimed, “anti-convention” was less palatable than it had been a decade earlier. Instead, constructionism was coming to represent an uncritical position. In 1960, working through the Design Research Unit, Martin had produced six large reliefs for the stairwells of the first-class section of the P&O liner SS Oriana (Fig. 13). In 1965, she produced a maquette for an unrealised fountain at Britannic House, the BP Headquarters in the City of London. These projects mark a shifting balance of relationships. In 1956, Mary Martin had written about the productive potentiality of artists working with architects “with a similar aesthetic approach”, while acknowledging that “it is the patron who makes such collaboration possible”. Only a few years later, the roles were changing. The private patron was emerging as pre-eminent (at the expense of the relationship between artist and architect). The pieces Martin produced for SS Oriana and Britannic House are themselves accomplished and the realisation of a consistent and ongoing body of works, but they reflect the interests of a new patron and the spaces
the new patron was shaping. Such works, in or intended for spaces of privilege and of the corporation, set constructionism apart from emergent critical practices.

The IUA experiment shows that, in 1961, a range of pressures on constructionism were being exerted. At one end of the range, the pressure might be considered as close, if not internal, to it. Claims of artistic autonomy made by supporters such as Lawrence Alloway were changing the terms on which constructionism was contextualised (some distance from the terms of social engagement). At the other end, the pressure might be considered external: the encroachment of private interests on the public spaces of post-war Britain was fundamentally changing the social circumstance that constructionism had been intent upon articulating.

**Interval: Lawrence Alloway, The Player**

Let’s take this moment of pause in the action to reflect on the role being played by the critic Lawrence Alloway. His part in this unfolding drama is comparable to that of The Player in Stoppard’s *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*: the relationship between the constructionist artists and Alloway is not unlike that between Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and The Player. In both sets of relationship, one party acts to commentate on, explain to, and ultimately condemn the other. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern regularly turn to The Player for advice and reassurance to assuage their sense of uncertainty and increasing vulnerability. They treat him as something like a guiding voice. The Player’s behaviour is, however, unpredictable and his remarks are regularly arch and opaque. It is unclear whose side he is on, and whose interests he serves beyond his own. Ultimately, The Player appears to be an agent active in orchestrating the eponymous heroes’ death; a fate—already written—that is simply to be played out. The constructionists didn’t rely upon Alloway to the same extent: they regularly proved themselves more than capable of speaking and writing about their work, and they did so with clarity and purpose. However, it was Alloway who frequently articulated their work, and located it within broad cultural and social contexts. Alloway’s support of the constructionists was considerable, but, as is apparent in Act One, that support was increasingly ambiguous.

Lawrence Alloway was a player. Like The Player, Alloway knew (or appeared to know) “which way the wind [was] blowing,” and was prepared to manoeuvre in accordance with that wind as well as, himself, generating new directions for it to blow in. His voice carried authority and influence, and he remains a figure of considerable interest and attention. By the time of the IUA Congress in 1961, Alloway was changing the terms of certain narratives that he himself had shaped: 1961 was the year that he relocated to New York to take up a senior curatorial post at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum.
The language that he used around the IUA can be understood in terms consistent with the American discourses of modernist autonomy to which he was increasingly drawn (alongside emerging languages of pop and minimalism).

Alloway, The Player, was manoeuvring. As was seen in Act One, Alloway’s promotion of artistic autonomy in relation to constructionist participation in the IUA Congress left their work stripped of significant purpose. He was, in effect, writing the end of the constructionist idea as socially engaged. On the subject of the Martins’ work in 1960, Alloway acknowledged that “criticism of British Constructivism has centred on its theoretical basis”, but insisted that the artists’ method transcended theory. 74 “In fact,” he went on, “as the observant spectator of Kenneth and Mary Martin’s works knows, the discipline of their making shapes the visual play we witness (quite apart from the theoretical background)”. 75 He would later write about the “platonic optimism” of earlier twentieth-century artists—a belief that “geometric forms could symbolise a realm of ideas”—being superseded by a post-war model that proceeded from an “existential base”. 76 In this shift from the platonic to the existential, the artistic act and the object produced by it is reinterpreted as immediate and material rather than transcendental. Such work did not transport the viewer to another plane, but actively engaged the viewer in a material and spatial present. In the 1950s, this amounted to a form of social engagement in terms of the works’ articulation of environment, its connection with new forms of functional architecture, and its definition of new forms of spectatorship.

In the 1950s, constructionist positioning was theorised. Although the shift from a platonic model to an existentialist one marked a departure from abstract concepts in favour of concrete facts, this shift was itself the subject of theoretical statements. For Alloway, the significant art of the 1950s (including that produced by the constructionists) was rethinking the role of the artist. The artists that interested Alloway were, in different ways, relinquishing absolute control of their work and handing increasing responsibility for the determination of form to others, such as audiences. Alloway was critical of what he saw as the arbitrary determination of much abstract art and the passivity of the spectator in relation to that art. He described such work as “monovalent”. 77 With particular reference to the construction kit sculptures being made at the time by the Independent Group artist John McHale, Alloway celebrated the new works’ “multivalency”: “here is an art that literally depends on human action”, he wrote. 78 The idea of a non-ideal spectator was important in constructionism also, but on different terms. For the constructionist, the others to which elements of formal determination was deferred were more likely to be architects (as demonstrated in Mary Martin’s work at Musgrave Park Hospital in 1957) than
audiences (to the extent that McHale had taken it). Constructionist work was directed at a broader public rather than the individual. Alloway appreciated the constructionist terms and considered them in line with the characteristics of the new architecture: “mass-production, flexible planning and movement which make any ideal canon inconceivable”. 79

Alloway regarded constructionist art as playful expression. He found, in the constructed reliefs made by Hill in the late 1950s, “the ludic principles of art (play without utilitarian goal)”. 80 According to Alloway, “Homo Ludens” was what the 1956 exhibition This is Tomorrow had staged. 81 The term was used in relation to the artists, designers, and architects who participated in the exhibition, and in relation to the audience who visited it. Such terms were expanded in 1957, when Alloway worked with Richard Hamilton and Victor Pasmore on an Exhibit, an immersive installation staged first at the Hatton Gallery in Newcastle and then at the ICA in London (Fig. 14). The project can, on several levels, be understood as a game, in the first instance played non-competitively (perhaps) by Hamilton (representing the Independent Group) and Pasmore (representing the constructionists) with Alloway commentating. Alloway described the structure of the exhibition as “one set of possible moves”. 82 The “rules” allowed for multiple outcomes determined as much by the visitor as by the artists. For Alloway, we are all players: “The meaning of an Exhibit,” he wrote, “is dependent on the decisions of visitors, just as, at an earlier stage, it was dependent on the artists who were the players”. 83 Act Two will reveal some of the implications of this game for the audience (in the form of residents of a constructionist environment). According to Alloway, an Exhibit exposed its audience as either “maze-bright” or “maze-dim”. 84 This is typically provocative and divisive on Alloway’s part, and Pasmore was uncomfortable with such language. 85
The bell is ringing for Act Two, an act that will not see Alloway make an appearance, but in which Pasmore will emerge as a main character. Much of the drama about to unfold happens with Alloway having departed for the United States. In the 1950s, he championed the work of Pasmore—regarding the artist as a “culture-hero” and as being “heroically motivated”—but had no word for or about him beyond 1961. Alloway, The Player, performs as interval entertainment, and he functions as a device: a pivot in the drama. His Player operates on two levels. One sees him manoeuvring (apparently serving multiple agendas and supporting diverse practices, but ultimately manoeuvring in self-service and towards his own career progression). We’ve seen some of the consequences of these manoeuvres in relation to the constructionist participation in the IUA Congress and constructionism more broadly. The second level on which Alloway plays concerns his idea that play itself is integral to art. This theme is important in the ongoing drama he’s now departed. As we prepare to head north to County Durham for Act Two, let’s keep an idea of the constructionist environment as a playground—as “a drama of space that involves the spectator”—in mind.

The lights are dimming.

**Act Two: Artist Projects, Peterlee**

As the curtain lifts on the second act of our drama, we pick up the action fifteen years after the IUA Congress, and more than 200 miles north of London. It is January 1976 and we are in Peterlee in County Durham (Fig. 15).
The performance artist Stuart Brisley is the new agent poised in the wings. He is about to demonstrate how far critical art and design practices had moved on from the principles of mid-century modernism. But before Brisley receives his cue, a scene needs setting; an environment needs to be constructed.

Figure 15.

Peterlee New Town was founded in 1948 as part of the New Towns Act of 1946. A constructionist artist, Victor Pasmor, was appointed by the Peterlee Development Corporation (PDC) in 1955 to work as Consulting Director of Urban Design. Pasmor worked with two young PDC architects, Peter Daniel and Frank Dixon, to develop the 300-acre South West Area. In all, Pasmor worked on six phases of development. Daniel and Dixon worked with him on the first two. Pasmor remained in the employ of the PDC until 1977. Pasmor’s work at Peterlee can be considered as producing something like a constructionist environment. The team’s initial instruction from the Corporation was “Do what you like, but don’t do what we have done before”.

What had gone before at Peterlee lurched from the spectacular but abandoned the “Brasilia of the North” master plan proposed by the Soviet émigré constructivist architect Berthold Lubetkin to the conservative but realised designs of the English architect George Grenfell-Baines. The latter
was said, by the editor of Architectural Review, to have produced housing of “the dreariest kind”. Pasmore went further, saying that Grenfell-Baines’ scheme “seemed to spread like a disease over the whole countryside”.

With an open invitation to innovate within tight economic limitations and planning restrictions, Pasmore, Daniel, and Dixon went on the offensive. Towards attempting “a new interpretation of a planned environment”, they “decided to attack six of the existing practices common in the New Town layouts”:

1. Mechanical planning by rule and by-law.
2. Purely drawing-board planning.
3. Failure to insulate the community from roads and motor vehicles.
4. Visual monotony of continuous housing and negative open spaces.
5. Complete subordination to old-fashioned building techniques.
6. The mistaken concept of the picturesque.

Having identified the enemy and highlighted its characteristics, the design team established five positive objectives: “First, to re-design the housing in a more modern architectural style; second, to re-define the atomic process; third, to re-constitute the spatial concept; fourth, to control repetition and, finally, to free the housing from the road system.” A decisive, modernist intent is apparent here: Pasmore, Daniel, and Dixon were determined to impose a “cubic concept” on the site. Individual housing units were flat-roofed cubic forms set in dynamic orthogonal relationship with others. Space was treated as a continuity: there was, for example, no clear distinction between the front and back of the houses. All spatial components were “treated as positive and integral architectural features”. Garages, fences, and pavements were as much a part of the scheme as the houses (Fig. 16).
A “total” environment was unified by adhering to an orthogonal rule that paid no attention to local topography. As the editor of *Architectural Review*, J.M. Richards noted that the houses were not “planned in conventional style along the contours”. Rather, they were “planned across them, against a gentle slope, thereby effectively challenging the landscape in spite of the small bulk of the individual units; and it is on this that their unusual geometry is based.”  

The scheme set itself aggressively against nature—or, at least, against a prevailing romanticist idea of nature—and thus, directly against the appeal of the picturesque apparent in a significant amount of contemporaneous art and architecture. For Pasmore’s team, the idea of submitting to the natural beauty of the site in a conventional way was based on a fallacious understanding of nature and the natural. For them, the landscape was itself man-made, having been shaped by industry and agriculture: it was, according to Daniel, “natural only in that it was made up of growing elements”.  

Pasmore’s team set out to create a “new landscape” “made of horizontal planes and roads, squares and courtyards, together with the vertical planes of buildings and the voids which they contained”. 

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**Figure 16.**
Victor Pasmore, Housing in the South West 3 and 4 area, Peterlee New Town, building commenced in 1964, photograph. Digital image courtesy of The Estate of Victor Pasmore (all rights reserved).
The ideas that informed the wider environment were reiterated in artworks that Pasmore produced for the site. In addition to the well-known *Apollo Pavilion* in the Sunny Blunts area of housing, constructed in 1969, Pasmore produced, among other things, a construction for Thames Road in the first area of housing, SW1, commenced in 1958 (Figs 17 and 18). The *Apollo Pavilion* survives, the construction does not. The *Apollo Pavilion* is an imposing concrete structure adorned with biomorphic abstract elements redolent of the increasingly organic language of Pasmore’s paintings of the 1960s; the construction was more consistent with Pasmore’s constructionist works of the 1950s (Fig. 19). Indeed, it directly connected Pasmore’s studio constructions of the early and mid-1950s with the architectural language used in much of the South West Area. The construction in SW1 was a non-monumental, projective, spatial articulation in an environmental context. It utilised the same materials as the domestic architecture and communal spaces in which it was sited; it stood as a formal expression without architectural utility. The idea was that the artwork enhances an environment and sensitises users of the space to its language. In 1957, Pasmore wrote of a “reciprocal” relationship between the new architecture and “pure form in painting and sculpture”: “If pure form strengthens architecture, architecture in turn vitalises pure form.” 98 Importantly—and here I would distinguish the Thames Road construction from the *Apollo Pavilion*—constructionist works do not dominate the environment. Instead, they are relational: singular impact is less significant than the environmental whole of which such works are a part.

Figure 17.
Victor Pasmore, Construction in the South West 1 and 2 area, Peterlee New Town, building commenced in 1958, photograph. Digital image courtesy of The Estate of Victor Pasmore (all rights reserved).
Pasmore regarded all elements of his work as producing, or being integrated within, a community of forms. On a small scale, in the work itself, the constructions of the 1950s articulate relationships between formal elements. The South West Area is comparable on an expansive, environmental scale. Pasmore wrote:
The South West Area was conceived as a series of clearly-defined housing communities related to each other in form and scale so as to make up a total environment which is both rationally practical and emotionally stimulating; in other words, to bring about an integrated urban development. 99

When Pasmore writes of “housing communities”, what he is writing about is the spatial relationship of architectural elements. The idea of a community of people is barely registered. Indeed, Pasmore’s own photographic record of Peterlee is one largely devoid of people. Numerous contact sheets conform to the codes of photography associated with the architectural profession, meaning that human presence is an exception; people are made absent from the documentation (Fig. 20). When a lone cyclist is captured, it serves as a reminder that people lived in this environment. Pasmore might write, ‘A town is a manifestation of the whole man, not an abstraction of him”, but the design is one that describes a new being—a symbolically modern, abstract being. 100 The idea was for an abstract environment—an abstract stage—for players to operate within. A social game was set up in the New Towns—a game with new rules—but, for all that Pasmore said and wrote about Peterlee, there is at best indirect reference to the people for whom it was being built. Nothing is said about local history and the identity of the people that would constitute the New Town community. In fact, the words and, indeed, the wider scheme were set aggressively against the past (as they were against the local topography). The modernist attitude apparent here is one that takes a clean slate, zero-form starting point: according to this attitude, historical injustice and inequality could only be overcome through the development of a new, unburdened society and culture. Pasmore felt that the post-war context necessitated “a fresh start”: “What seemed to be required was not a new mirror or a new symbol, but a new process of development”. 101 As such, the erasure of tradition and historically shaped identity was a strategic imperative. What was mobilised in Peterlee was a comparable model to that developed in the an Exhibit project that Pasmore had undertaken with Richard Hamilton (and Lawrence Alloway). The South West Area housing was conceived as an open form to be occupied—as something of a residential playground. Pasmore and the team around him were not setting out to dictate ways of living, but to create an environment that was to be ultimately articulated by the residents. Just as in an Exhibit, the game was to be taken up by the audience, or, in this case, the townspeople.
For the performance artist Stuart Brisley, approaching the town in the first few days of 1976, the “fundamental question” was concerned with the “human quality” of the community. For him, historical erasure, far from producing a progressive reality, had instead (unwittingly) reproduced unequal distributions of power and agency.

[Enter Stuart Brisley, from the left]

When Brisley arrived in Peterlee to work as Town Artist, he found it built, but evidently riddled with issues. When he photographed the Apollo Pavilion in 1976, it was already in a state of disrepair only seven years after its construction (Figs 21 and 22). What Brisley read through the environment was the failure of the Peterlee Development Corporation to work for, and more importantly with, the newly assembled human community. What he found was a people detached from social fabrics. Brisley’s project notes
frequently identify New Town Development Corporations as unelected bodies and stress that New Town residents had no means to challenge them. 103 Brisley remarks on “the Development Corporation’s paternalism and long-standing elitism—always knowing what was best for people without consulting them”. 104 Brisley was, however, in Peterlee as part of an Artist Placement Group project negotiated with the PDC itself. His appointment coincided with a major overhaul of PDC personnel as well as its reduced authority. Brisley recognised an opportunity in this changing circumstance for the “restoration of a measure of self-government for the people of Peterlee”. 105 Pasmore’s work at Peterlee is not directly mentioned by Brisley (even if Pasmore was still in the employ of the PDC, although ever-more remotely, having relocated to Malta in 1966). However, Pasmore’s failure to directly engage or acknowledge the residents of the South West Area housing can be seen as representative of the wider concerns about the people’s treatment that Brisley does clearly express. (Just as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern can, in Stoppard’s play, be seen as stooges of the Danish Court, so Pasmore might, in terms set out by Brisley, be seen as a stooge of the PDC).

Figure 21.
The difference between what Brisley did as a Town Artist in Peterlee and what Pasmore had done as Consulting Director of Urban Design is marked. Where Pasmore imposed a modernist culture on the site, Brisley did not. Taking a prompt from the “History from Below” movement that had been developed by an emergent New Left of the 1960s including, for example, the Hackney Writers’ Group to which Brisley acknowledges a debt, Brisley took an “incidental” position towards encouraging and facilitating cultural production by the local residents. His idea was to draw out a culture that had been neglected if not erased in the formation of Peterlee.

Brisley conducted feasibility work in Peterlee in July 1975, and, from that, he proposed a three-part project. The first phase involved the gathering of images, documents, and recorded interviews to form a “people’s history” (Fig. 23). By July 1976, Brisley had recruited a small team of unemployed Peterlee residents to conduct the work with him: the first project report identifies Jane Bennison, Karen Carr, Pat Gallagher, and John Porter as the “personnel”, having been “engaged through the Manpower Services Commission job creation team”, alongside Brisley (here identified as “Consultant to the PDC”). Brisley insists that the work was not about conducting a “social survey, nor intended to become primarily an archive of local history”; there was “no ‘end product’ planned”. Instead, the idea was one of constructing a dynamic history of the present (not the past), of
influencing “community consciousness”. The first phase was the only one completed. Through it though, 2,000 photographs, 1,000 slides, and 50 taped interviews and transcripts were amassed. Brisley departed Peterlee in August 1977, with the dissolution of the PDC and the passing over of its remit to Easington District Council. The unrealised phases included expanding particular histories and developing the form the project would take towards operating as a platform for debate and action. Such ambitions were thwarted as soon as the District Council took control: the material they inherited as “History Within Living Memory” was quickly renamed (and reconfigured) as the “People Past and Present Archive”. It is now a local history heritage archive hosted by Durham County Council.

Despite having been locally disabled as “a social tool”, Brisley’s work in Peterlee is nevertheless still regarded as prototypical for recent and current socially engaged art practices. In this sense, it can be (and has been) thought of as a “successful failure”. It stands as a model that is widely celebrated in the critical discourses of contemporary art. In contrast, Pasmore’s work in Peterlee is commonly considered through the less-critical terms of heritage. It is Brisley’s example that chimes with contemporary practice on the level of method. Claire Bishop discusses Brisley’s Peterlee project at length in her book *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*. She identifies resonances between Brisley’s work in

![Figure 23.](image)

Peterlee and contemporary, twenty-first-century art theory and practice, for example, Bishop observes that there has been a shift from socially engaged art producing “works of art” to undertaking “projects”. More historically, she considers Brisley’s project as part of a wider reflection on “two attempts to rethink the artist’s role in society” in the 1960s and 1970s (both of which retain considerable currency). One attempt is represented by strategies employed by the Artist Placement Group (APG), founded in the mid-1960s; the other is the community arts movement that emerged in the 1970s. The APG model is “one in which the artist undertakes a placement with a company or government body”; the community arts model is “one in which the individual artist assumes the role of facilitating creativity among ‘everyday’ people”. Although Brisley’s work in Peterlee was conducted under the auspices of the APG, his relationship with that organisation was fractious. In line with APG practices, Brisley was placed in relation to the PDC with the intention of impacting on its operations, but he was more interested in using his position to engage the local residential community towards critically articulating its immediate circumstance, its multiple histories, identities, and futures. For Brisley, it was important to disrupt the established distribution of power that APG projects too-regularly, to his mind, reproduced. The work Brisley did at Peterlee has, instead, more in common with community arts in its bypassing of official, institutional structures.

Brisley’s work is representative of a bottom–up model of critical art practice that superseded a top–down model, represented here by Pasmore. For the constructionists, social engagement came with the production of contingent works that operate in public space and/or in relation to architecture. The belief was that a certain type of art and a certain type of environment might positively influence the wider social system. Increasingly denied the opportunities to work in such contexts—indeed, with the wider absence of such contexts—the constructionist response was to strategically withdraw; to determine works that operate in a parallel, propositional space, as autonomous works of potentiality. For Brisley (and Metzger before him), this approach was inadequate in meeting the immediate social and political challenges, and lacked an essential criticality. For all its claims to be constructive, Metzger regarded the modern project as destructive. His response was to reflect this and, in doing so, reveal and repurpose destruction. Brisley also recognised the destruction inherent in modern practices (in relation, for example, to the destruction of social fabric), but his response was less to appropriate destruction than to produce a social form that resisted cultural erasure. On this productive (if not constructive) level, Brisley’s action is not unrelated to Pasmore’s. Brisley, however, positively foregrounds class identity and difference. As such, he departs from Pasmore’s modern outlook that believed in the universal potential of abstract form.
Epilogue

The lost cause of constructionism can be read through the events that played out at the IUA Congress in 1961 and in Peterlee New Town some years later. Of course, this reading is partial: such scenes will only ever yield glimpses towards understanding a wider, complex whole. Accepting these limitations, a number of conclusions can be drawn. The “IUA experiment” reveals public agendas giving way to private interests. Constructionism (here represented by Hill and the Martins) found its principles and public ambitions stripped of context. In the 1950s, constructionism recognised a potential in the post-war framing of the public, and in the progressive interweaving of the economic, the social, the political, and the cultural. The subsequent separation of these spheres undermined the constructionist idea. Metzger’s action shows something of the new directions critical art was moving in; essentially a more urgent and oppositional direction, and with it the development of a new definition of public art. Further to and out of this, Brisley’s activities reveal a different understanding of how public interests had (and hadn’t) been represented in the development of Peterlee New Town. As critical art practices abandoned cooperative participation in the conflicted spaces of institutionalised infrastructure (at least in terms of joining in the production of such spaces), constructionism was exposed and implicated.

Constructionism (and the wider constructive tradition of which it is a part) sought to shape a popular, everyday culture out of specialist laboratory researches utilising industrial and architectural materials in combination with abstract form. This was a top–down model that fell out of favour with the late twentieth-century art that directly or indirectly critiqued modernist principles and practices. From the bottom–up trajectory of, for instance, 1960s pop art through to the more politically urgent positions taken by artists such as Metzger and Brisley, a culture-from-below approach is apparent in a significant amount of socially engaged work produced in the 1960s and 1970s (and beyond). Constructionism had, in the 1950s, shared common ground with the proto-pop of the Independent Group, as evidenced, say, by both groups working in tense alliance towards the *This is Tomorrow* exhibition in 1956, and in Pasmore’s work with Hamilton on *an Exhibit* a year later. The top–down trajectory of constructionism temporarily met the bottom–up trajectory of the Independent Group. Both shared an interest in disrupting cultural hierarchies and privileges, but the “bottom–up” approach was in the ascendency, and the groups subsequently diverged. Avant-gardism was being overtaken by new forms of insubordination.

This was the period in which it is said that the historical avant-garde gave way to the neo-avant-garde. The shift is mapped by Peter Bürger in his book *Theory of the Avant-Garde*. According to Bürger, the avant-garde project was
one of attacking the institutions of art and, indeed, the very category of art. The historical avant-garde worked towards the “sublation of art” and towards its absorption within the “praxis of life”. 118 Realising the failure of the avant-gardist unification of art and life, Bürger argues that related neo-avant-gardist art practice could no longer “pretend that it has direct effect”. 119 New balances and settlements were agreed that rendered the avant-garde project not only historical but itself re-institutionalised as art. Instead of working with the historical principle that art could become fused with everyday life, the neo-avant-garde worked on the reverse principle that the everyday could be elevated to the status of art. Metzger’s “Auto-Creative” Cardboards of 1959 are an example of this (Fig. 24). In these works, Metzger took deconstructed television packaging found on a London street to the gallery having identified and redesignated it as sculpture. However closely related this might be to the historical avant-gardism of, say, the ready-made or even constructivism, Bürger would argue that such work asserts (rather than questions) the category of art. On other fronts, Metzger recognised and actively resisted cultural shifts. In 1974, he was calling for three years without art (something that he alone undertook in 1977). 120 The incidental role assumed by Brisley in Peterlee in 1976 might be understood as another critical response. The Peterlee Project was not to be categorised as art, but rather as a framework within which the culture of the residents might become visible. Pasmore had, in his own way, attempted to stage the residents of Peterlee, but constructionism proved itself less responsive to changing circumstances.
Constructionism maintained an avant-gardist position in terms of dissolving art into the environment, but was stymied by emerging discourses. In 1966, Mary Martin would suggest, “If one takes something straight out of everyday life and places it in a work of art with no transformation then life will always beat it”. In this sense, it is the artist’s job to determine form, however much that form might be contingent upon external elements such as geometrical systems or architectural environments. Nevertheless, for ongoing constructionist production, what occurs within the work overtook its expansive relationship with social space. The seeds of that were cultivated by Alloway in the language of autonomy used in relation to the constructionist contributions to the IUA Congress in 1961. Such iterations do not, of course, in themselves mark or produce change. They do, however,
function within broader narratives to reproduce and reinforce the authority of those narratives. It is in the accumulation of such details that historical momentum is established.

Art history chooses its heroes. It commonly represents Russian constructivism as heroic, and its demise as the consequence of an aggressive political authoritarianism. Russian constructivism’s failure does not taint its reputation; in fact, its failure guarantees its reputation. The lost cause of British constructionism is framed differently.

Footnotes

1 Metzger’s auto-destructive theory and practice has enjoyed significant attention for some time. His famous demonstration of auto-destructive art on the South Bank, London in 1961 was re-performed by Brian Hodgson under Metzger’s supervision as part of the How to Improve the World: 60 Years of British Art exhibition at the Hayward Gallery, London in 2006. Metzger was the subject of a retrospective exhibition at the Serpentine Gallery, London in 2009, and, more recently (2015–2016), another staged at the Centre of Contemporary Art in Toruń, Poland, and at Kunsthernes Hus in Oslo, Norway. Brissley’s work in Peterlee has, among other things, been historicised by Claire Bishop in her book Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship (London: Verso, 2012), and in an exhibition at Modern Art Oxford in 2014.

2 When constructionism has been the subject of art-historical attention, the histories formed are less concerned with it as a “critical art”, for example, Alastair Grieve’s significant monograph, Constructed Abstract Art in England: A Neglected Avant-Garde (New Haven, CT: Published for the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art by Yale University Press, 2005), or are dismissive of constructionism as a part of a history of critical art, for example, Mark Crinson’s “The Incidental Collection—Stuart Brisley’s Peterlee Project”, Mute, 1, no. 28 (2004): 122-133.


4 With greater political urgency, for example, Jean Rhys had played the same game as Stoppard in her novel, Wide Sargasso Sea (1966), that retold Charlotte Brontë’s Jane Eyre (1847) from an alternative (anti-colonial, feminist) perspective, marginalised in the original.

5 Tom Stoppard, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead (London: Faber & Faber, 1968), 31.


7 The terms used by the British group to describe itself and the work it produced were many. Words like “abstract”, “concrete”, “constructive”, “constructivist”, and “constructionist” were all used at different times and in different contexts. For the sake of consistency, the group are here referred to as the constructionists. This was a word they regularly used to identify themselves, having adopted it from the writings of the American artist Charles Biederman. His monumental book, Art as the Evolution of Visual Knowledge (1948), was enthusiastically received by British artists. In it, Biederman used the word “constructionist” to signal a distinction from (Russian) constructivism, and identify a stage in artistic development that drew from and moved on from constructivism, incorporating other models such as Mondrian’s neo-plasticism and Max Bill’s concretism. It has been suggested that the word constructionism ‘emphasises the social dimension of a given construction rather than a subjective, perceptual engagement’; see Elena Crippa, “Designing Exhibitions, Exhibiting Participation”, in Elena Crippa and Lucy Steeds (eds), Exhibition, Design, Participation: ‘an Exhibit’ 1957 and Related Projects (London: Afterall Books, 2016), 16. This is appropriate, but could be said to be a retroactive application of the terms of social constructionism developed later, in the 1960s.


13 Beveridge, Social Insurance and Allied Services, 6.


15 Bann, Systems, 9.

As previously mentioned, Stoppard leaned lightly on the work of Beckett in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. Vladimir and Estragon—the central characters in Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* (1954)—inform Stoppard’s elaboration of Shakespeare’s dramatis personae. The final act of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* opens with the main characters in barrels, a direct reference to Beckett’s *Endgame* (1957).


Anon., “Experiment in Integration”, 483.

Anon., “Experiment in Integration”, 483.

Anon., “Experiment in Integration”, 483.

Anon., “Experiment in Integration”, 482.

Lawrence Alloway, “Real Places”, *Architectural Design* 28, no. 6 (June 1958), 249.

Alloway, “Real Places”, 249.

Alloway, “Real Places”, 249.


Alloway “Criticism”, 507.


Alloway, “Criticism”, 507.

A model of the section that Weeks worked on with the Martins for the *This is Tomorrow* exhibition (1956) was shown, as was their submission to a competition for a monument at Auschwitz (1958).


In Section 6 of *This is Tomorrow*, Hill worked with the artists John Ernest and Denis Williams.


Alloway, “Non-Figurative Art in England”.


Rowntree, “Buildings for Architects”.


Metzger was drawn to the ready-made object and the discarded by-products of manufacture, as is clear in his *Cardboards* work of 1959 that utilises the cardboard package for a television set. Andrew Wilson connects *Cardboards* with the precedent set by Marcel Duchamp’s idea of the ready-made, and also with Russian Constructivism; see Andrew Wilson, “Gustav Metzger’s Auto-Destructive/Auto-Creative Art: An Art of Manifesto, 1959–1969”, *Third Text* 22, no. 2 (March 2008), 182.


For balance, it should be noted that Mary Martin also produced a notable large-scale work, *Wall Construction*, for Robert Matthew and Stirrat Johnson-Marshall’s Pathfoot Building at University of Stirling in 1969. She also continued to participate in avant-garde contexts such as exhibiting at David Medalla’s Signals London in 1966.

Mary Martin, *This is Tomorrow* exhibition catalogue (London: Whitechapel Art Gallery, 1956), unpaginated.

Stoppard, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, 49.

See, for example, Lucy Bradnock, Courtney J. Martin, and Rebecca Peabody (eds), *Lawrence Alloway: Critic and Curator* (Los Angeles, CA: Getty Publications, 2015).


Alloway, “The Spectator’s Intervention”, 172.


In this text for the *This is Tomorrow* exhibition catalogue, “Design as a Human Activity”, Alloway references Johan Huizinga’s book *Homo Ludens*, and discusses the show in relation to play; Lawrence Alloway, “Design as a Human Activity”, *This is Tomorrow*, exhibition catalogue (London: Whitechapel Art Gallery, 1956).


Alloway, *An Exhibit*, unpaginated.


A.V. Williams’s words recalled and paraphrased by Roy Gazzard in “Housing Experiment at Peterlee”, *Architectural Association Journal* 133, no. 3436 (June 1961), 7. Williams was General Manager of Peterlee Development Corporation from its establishment in 1948; Gazzard was appointed Chief Architect/Planner for the Peterlee Development Corporation in 1960.
Development Corporations were a fixture of the post-war New Town projects. They were appointed by central government and were responsible for constructing urban infrastructure and attracting industry. In New Towns, the role of the elected Local Authority was limited to overseeing services, such as education and health.

Much of the architectural language of the South West Area was lost with significant reworking of the houses in the 1980s. Façades were dramatically altered and pitched-roofs added. More recently, attention has moved to preserving and restoring the **Apollo Pavilion**. The District Council received Heritage Lottery funding to fully restore the **Apollo Pavilion**, and this was completed in 2009. It achieved a Grade-II listing by Historic England in 2011. On a contemporary art front, there has been engagement, for example, Jane and Louise Wilson have made work in response to Pasmore’s Peterlee in the form of their 2003 piece, **Monument (Apollo Pavilion, Peterlee)**, but it takes its place alongside their other works that engage with decommissioned sites. In other words, it is a subject—or indeed, an object—that comes from a different time and place.
Bibliography


Abstract

Examining the afterlife of Aubrey Beardsley (1872–1898) in Russia at the beginning of the twentieth century, this article focuses on the coterie of his primary admirers, the St Petersburg aesthetes of the World of Art group led by Sergei Diaghilev, and the circulation of Beardsley's images through the World of Art’s journal *Mir iskusstva*. After tracing how this network acquired their initial knowledge of Beardsley, the article unpacks selective strategies and ideological choices which underpinned his representation to Russian audiences. Entrenched in the topical debates of Russian *fin de siècle* about national identity and cosmopolitanism, Beardsley’s circulation was fashioned into a signifier of the latter. The article finds that it was the neo-rococo phase of Beardsley’s work that tapped into the World of Art’s vision of modernity and the group’s promotion of the international Rococo Revival, which was, in its turn, tied to their reinvention of the eighteenth-century Russian cultural tradition. By examining how the group’s designers, in particular, Leon Bakst, adopted Beardsley’s technique, the article also shows that his stylised graphic language was uniquely suited to facilitate the traversal of boundaries between art forms.

Authors

Acknowledgements

This article stems from my PhD research on Aubrey Beardsley’s Russian afterlives, which was funded by the Birkbeck School of Arts Anniversary Scholarship. The transformation of my thesis chapter into this article was supported by the Wellcome Trust ISSF2 award [204770/Z/16/Z] and the Alessandra Wilson Fund research grant. I am grateful to Ana Parejo Vadillo, Pamela Davidson, Philip Bullock, Jane Desmarais, Robert Stearn, and Martin Lohrer as well as the reviewers commissioned by BAS for their helpful comments on the many incarnations of this text.
Cite as

Aubrey Beardsley (1872–1898) has long been regarded as “peculiarly of his period”. Mainly remembered as the notorious illustrator of Oscar Wilde’s play *Salome* (1894) and the art editor of the emblematic 1890s journal *Yellow Book*, he was also a man of letters, dandy, and wit. Beardsley died of tuberculosis in 1898, leaving behind design commissions, poems, aphorisms, and an unfinished erotic novella *Under the Hill* (1896), based on Richard Wagner’s opera *Tannhäuser* (1845). It is no surprise that he has come to represent the decadent *fin-de-siècle* artist par excellence. In the 1890s, the memoirist Holbrook Jackson even declared Beardsley “a prisoner for ever in those Eighteen Nineties of which he had been so inevitable an expression”.

Although his extraordinary black-and-white designs have indeed provided a visual key for contemporary preoccupations with eroticism, decadence, and the grotesque, the period’s “prisoner” he was not. Beardsley’s remarkable international fame was both the product and the producer of a number of cosmopolitan coteries that spread his works across Europe while shaping, at the same time, avant-garde movements that adopted Beardsley as their flagship artist. Today, we are living through another “Beardsley Craze”, with the publication of Linda Gertner Zatlin’s monumental *Aubrey Beardsley: A Catalogue Raisonné*, followed by major Beardsley exhibitions at Tate Britain (March–September 2020) and at the Musée d’Orsay (October 2020–January 2021). Of the many histories of the artist’s international reception, one crucial story remains untold: the one of Beardsley’s afterlife in Russia.

While many scholars have acknowledged in passing Beardsley’s influence on specific Russian figures and movements, no systematised account of this subject has been produced in English. Rosamund Bartlett’s most recent essay, “Beardsley and Russia” in the catalogue of Tate Britain’s exhibition, only starts to open up avenues for future research. In Russia, on the other hand, the impact of Beardsley’s art and persona on early twentieth-century culture has become more widely recognised in recent years. As a testament to this legacy, a large-scale exhibition, *Oscar Wilde, Aubrey Beardsley: A View from Russia*, took place at the Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts (Moscow) in 2014. The catalogue contains Sofía Chapkina-Ruga’s survey of the ways Beardsley’s technique was adopted by Russian graphic artists and Ekaterina Viazova’s insightful essay with a broader view of the artist’s role in the formation of Russian Aestheticism. And yet, there is more to be said about the scope of the Russian “Beardsley Craze” than one exhibition can cover. This article redresses this gap by outlining the scope of Russian Beardsleyism, mapping the primary network of Russian Beardsleyites associated with the St Petersburg group World of Art, and exploring the dissemination of Beardsley’s work through their pioneering modernist journal of the same name, *Mir iskusstva (World of Art, 1899–1904)*. The article also
examines the adoption of Beardsley’s visual language by the journal’s designers, which constituted another channel for the transmission of his aesthetics in Russia.

Discovered in the mid-1890s by the World of Art coterie’s aesthetes, Beardsley was soon fashioned into a cultural icon. The Russian circulation of his work began with the opening volume of the group’s periodical *Mir iskusstva* and soon included a thematic “Beardsley issue” of the Moscow Symbolist review *Vesy (Libra)*, translations of verses and prose, elegant albums of drawings, entries in popular encyclopaedias, scholarly monographs, and more (Fig. 1). The fascination with the artist extended far beyond the small circle of critics and publishers. A hairstyle à la Beardsley was in fashion among the dandies of Moscow and St Petersburg (Figs 2 and 3). The literary evocations of “the cigar ladies of Art Nouveau” were peppered with references to Beardsley’s designs. In literature, Beardsley’s name was integrated into the vast body of modernist poetry and prose, with homages from authors as different as Andrei Bely, Anatolii Mariengof, and Aleksei Lozina-Lozinskii, to name but a few (Fig. 4). In visual art, Beardsley’s imagery and style became so common during the 1910s that its wide dissemination threatened to undermine the artist’s elite status.
Figure 1.
Nikolai Feofilaktov, A Tribute to Aubrey Beardsley, cover design for the thematic issue of Vesy 11 (1905), in Nikolai Feofilaktov, 66 risunkov (Moscow: Skorpion, 1909), plate 13. Collection of Cambridge University Library (Rare Books, Lib.5.90.405, N. Feofilaktov, Plate 13). Digital image courtesy of The Syndics of Cambridge University Library (all rights reserved).
Figure 2.

Figure 3.
Nikolai Gumilev, 1911, photograph. Digital image courtesy of http://gumilev.ru (all rights reserved).
Figure 4.

A vivid illustration of the spread of the “Beardsley craze” in Russia occurs in the memoirs of the artist Nikolai Kuz´min, in his account of a study day at the Society for the Encouragement of the Arts (St Petersburg) in 1913. Kuz´min describes some typical drawings brought in by an aspiring student from the provinces: the pictures were filled with “goat-hoofed satyrs, harlequins and columbines, ladies in hoop skirts and ostrich feathers and ladies with no costumes at all, but with high coiffures and wearing masks, pierrots in cloaks with pompons and sultanesses in turbans and salwars”. Halfway through the novice’s portfolio, the master of the studio, artist Ivan Bilibin declared: “Beardsley keeps [you] up at night”. As Kuz´min clarifies, when “a legion of petty imitators had adjusted the whimsical style of the refined English boy for the tastes of the readership of the journals of ‘beautiful life’, imitating Beardsley became ‘mauvais ton’”. The name of the late Victorian artist grew into a set epithet. The “Beardsleysque” now characterised an aesthetic, a style, and a quality, which could be discovered in people and things. This article will look at the dawn of the Russian “Beardsley craze” and examine how the initial fashioning of the artist’s reputation reflected the tensions between nationalism and cosmopolitanism as well as the conflicting perceptions of modernity in the turn-of-the-century Russian art circles.
The study of Beardsley’s circulation in Russia begins with World of Art’s journal *Mir iskusstva*. As John Bowlt clarifies, the name “World of Art” was adopted by several groups during the first decades of the twentieth century: an informal “club” founded by St Petersburg aesthetes in 1889 and the eponymous periodical they launched a decade later; and a series of three exhibitions (in 1899–1906 and 1910–1924 in St Petersburg; and in 1921 and 1927 in Paris) as well as the three separate societies which organised them. While the title remained unchanged, the individuals and activities associated with it shifted. This essay concentrates on the first group, the World of Art’s founders. The key members included the coterie’s charismatic leader Sergei Diaghilev, the would-be secretary of the Ballets Russes company Val’ter Nuvel’, the future religious and political writer Dmitrii Filosofov, and the artists Aleksandr Benois, Konstantin Somov, and Leon Bakst. From the very outset of their careers, the World of Art members considered Beardsley one of their “masters of thoughts”. According to Benois’ recollections, the circle heard of the late Victorian *enfant terrible* through their associate Al´fred Nurok. A “typical Decadent”, several years older than the rest of the group, he posed among his friends as an aesthete and a man of the world. He worshipped Oscar Wilde, one of his great “authorities”, and though not devoted to fine arts in general, consistently championed Beardsley’s work within the milieu of the World of Art.

From as early as 1894, the group kept up to date with Beardsley’s career. Thus, in his monograph of 1918, the art historian Sergei Ernst maintains that Somov was one of the first subscribers of *The Savoy*, the journal in which Beardsley served in 1896 as the artist in chief. Moreover, the World of Art’s knowledge of Beardsley’s works stretched beyond the well-known and widely available, and into the domain of the arcane. As Anna Zav´ialova discovered in 2008, Somov produced a copy of Beardsley’s sexually explicit drawing *A Snare of Vintage* and presented it as a birthday gift to the Moscow hostess Vera Firsanova. The original was meant to illustrate *Lucian’s True History*, privately printed by Lawrence and Bullen in London in 1894. The publisher, however, considered the design indecent. A platinotype made from Beardsley’s design was inserted loose only in fifty-four large paper copies of the edition. According to Zav´ialova, Somov’s replica of this restricted illustration is dated 1894, that is, the same year *Lucian’s True History* appeared in print. Somov’s lasting personal interest in the artist was confirmed in 1906, when he compiled an album of Beardsley’s drawings, and in 1924, when he recorded consulting Beardsley’s originals from Albert Gallatin’s collection at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.
Benois notes in his memoirs that Diaghilev met Beardsley personally at the house of the painter Jacques-Émile Blanche in Dieppe in 1897. The subject of their conversation remains undocumented. Nevertheless, corresponding with the Scottish critic and artist D.S. MacColl in the following year, Diaghilev stated that he had known “Beardsley at Dieppe” and declared himself one of the artist’s “greatest admirers”. The meeting with Beardsley closely followed the visit Diaghilev paid to Benois in Brittany, during which the two shared ideas about the World of Art’s future periodical, Mir iskusstva. Doubtless, Beardsley must have interested Diaghilev as the designer of the two avant-garde English journals of the 1890s, the Yellow Book and The Savoy. Moreover, there is some evidence that Diaghilev may have conceived Mir iskusstva as a Russian version of another English periodical closely linked with Beardsley. Benois recalls that, while discussing the future publication of Mir iskusstva with Vladimir Argutinskii in 1896, Diaghilev gave the English Studio as an example. In 1893, the inaugural issue of the Studio was published with Beardsley’s cover design, featuring eight reproductions of his drawings and a laudatory article about the artist by Joseph Pennell.

At the time of the meeting with the would-be impresario in Dieppe, Beardsley would have been working on the illustrations for Théophile Gautier’s novel Mademoiselle de Maupin (1835). As recalled by the translator and poet Douglas Ainslie, who also came across Beardsley in the summer of 1897, the artist was “living at a small hotel at Dieppe, [...] immersed at that time in the reading of Gautier, and in the illustrative work of Watteau, Fragonard and other French masters of his century”. Having met Beardsley at that particular stage in the artist’s work, Ainslie consequently reckoned him an eighteenth-century man, who “belonged to that period in France, though with his genius he reached out into the future and has influenced black and white work more than any other artist of our time”. Likewise, Diaghilev’s encountering Beardsley during the Mademoiselle de Maupin phase, when the artist’s interest in his favourite eighteenth-century was at its peak, had a considerable effect on the representation of his work in Mir iskusstva, as this article will demonstrate.

**Mir iskusstva and Beardsley’s Rococo Revival**

Through their periodical, the World of Art group aspired to educate the public about the latest European trends and intensify transnational cultural exchange. In its visual presentation, Mir iskusstva followed the examples of European art nouveau periodicals: the German Pan and Jugend, the French La Revue Blanche, and the English journals, Yellow Book, Savoy, and Studio, all mentioned above. The World of Art coterie fashioned Mir iskusstva as a “book beautiful” paying special attention to typography and fine paper, as
well as ordering high-quality art reproductions from abroad during the first years of publication. Thus, the visual appearance asserted the place of the Russian journal within the burgeoning network of periodicals which transmitted New Art internationally. At the same time, critical essays made the readership acquainted with the foreign representatives of these art trends and foregrounded the nexus between Russia and the West. How then did Beardsley fit into this modern and cosmopolitan agenda, fostered by the periodical’s editorial collective?

After the launch of *Mir iskusstva* in 1899, it started championing Beardsley’s work in Russia. The designs *Faun Reading to a Woman* and *Lady on a Sofa* (both 1896) were used to illustrate Diaghilev’s aesthetic manifesto “Complicated Questions” (Fig. 5). Nurok’s short introductory article on Beardsley was published in the same issue of the journal. Drawing attention to the playful eroticism of Beardsley’s work, Nurok marvelled at the artist’s “powerful artistic individuality”, “particularly charming” in the representations of “excessively-sensuous and mysteriously seductive phenomena of soul’s life”. Acknowledging the distinct styles absorbed by Beardsley, he singled out “japonisme with its refined simplification” and “the compositions of the Régence epoch filled with subjectivity”. 


The “Régence epoch” and neo-rococo style became the focal point in the representation of Beardsley in *Mir iskusstva* in 1900, when D.S. MacColl’s essay on the artist was published in the double issues 7–8 and 9–10 and supplied with twelve designs by Beardsley (Fig. 6). Commissioned by Diaghilev in 1898, the essay was meant to familiarise the Russian “public with that refined and exquisite artist’s meaning, with the causes of the apparition of his art and with a general aspect of his personality”, while pointing out “the influence that this, as yet not fully appreciated painter [sic!], has had”. MacColl’s extensive account was translated into Russian, most likely, by the Beardsleyite and Anglophile Nurok. The original version became available in English only five decades later when it was printed by R.A. Walker.
The selection of reproductions shows the editors’ preference for those pictures which spoke of Beardsley’s fascination with the eighteenth century. In around 1896, the year which Robert Ross called Beardsley’s “annus mirabilis”, the artist adopted a wistful neo-rococo style for his designs and literary experiments. As Ken Ireland shows in his book on the rococo revival, the resurgence of taste for things of the ancien régime was a widespread European trend in the second half of the nineteenth century. From Paul Verlaine’s set of poems Fêtes galantes (1869) to Walter Pater’s fictional evocation of Jean-Antoine Watteau in “A Prince of Court Painters” (1885), from Édouard Manet’s pastoral themes to the early drawings by Alphonse Mucha, neo-rococo was an omnipresent influence. Beardsley’s ajouré technique quickly turned him into one of the emblems of this vogue.
Thus, the Symbolist author Alfred Jarry alluded to Beardsley as “the king of Lace” in a Beardsley-dedicated chapter of the novel *Exploits and Opinions of Doctor Faustroll, Pataphysician* (1898). Although not unprecedented, Beardsley’s expertise in literature and art of the gallant age was considered outstanding among his contemporaries. His letters were interlarded with mentions of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century French engravers, painters, and writers.

Exemplary of this phase, four of Beardsley’s illustrations for Alexander Pope’s “heroi-comical poem” *The Rape of the Lock* (1896) embellished MacColl’s article in *Mir iskusstva* (Figs 7–9). The exuberance of wigs and opulent garments, rococo furniture, and artificial landscapes summoned the era of Louis XV, while linear clarity evoked engravings by Jean-Antoine Watteau and his circle. “Never”, according to Beardsley’s lifetime critics, had “his peculiar gifts been exposed with more perfect felicity” than in those intricate “embroideries”. Close in style to *The Rape of the Lock* designs were three drawings from *The Savoy* (1896), reproduced in *Mir iskusstva*: an ornate Under the Hill illustration *Fruit Bearers*, a fanciful *The Death of Pierrot* (Fig. 10) featuring commedia dell’arte characters, and the cover for the first issue of *The Savoy* depicting a lady and a putto-like page in an Arcadian garden.
Figure 7.
Figure 8.
Figure 9.
The lace-like recreations of the eighteenth century were also typical of the work of many members of the World of Art coterie at fin de siècle. In the case of Somov, immersion in eighteenth-century art coincided with his interest in Beardsley. Thus, Ernst remarks that, “talking about the sources of Somov’s art”, one should consider “the influence of the ‘morbid’ Beardsleyan grotesque as well as the eighteenth-century engravings, for which he developed a passion alongside his love for Beardsley”. As Benois notes in an article on Somov, “we were all astonished when, after he got to know [...] the just published drawings by Aubrey Beardsley, he suddenly found his own form of expression”. In addition to the countless depictions of masques and fests, gallants and marquises, Somov’s homage to the French eighteenth
century is famously exemplified by his piquant illustrations for the anthology of the period’s erotic literature Das Lesebuch der Marquise: Ein Rokokobuch (1908), edited by Franz Blei (Fig. 11). 46

The World of Art’s penchant for the frivolous dix-huitième world was ideological as well as aesthetic. The group’s promotion of the eighteenth-century style related to the ambition of reconstituting Russian art as an integral part of the European cultural tradition. The members’ preoccupation with the rococo revival was not limited to the adoption of the current European vogue but also encompassed a recovery of the Russian artistic heritage of the pro-Western, post-Petrine period. By promoting this strain of Russian culture, the World of Art provided an alternative to the populist “Russian style” which, according to Karen Kettering, indicated various
attempts to create “an ethnically or nationally ‘true’ form of decoration, usually described as a design or ornament that had appeared or been in use before any sort of outside or foreign influence could be detected”. As Kettering explains, the proponents of the “Russian style”, such as the art patrons Savva Mamontov and Mariia Tenisheva, looked upon the peasantry as a “repository” for national authenticity which had been, supposedly, “eradicated” among the gentry and bourgeoisie by the “modernization” of Peter the Great at the end of the seventeenth century. By contrast, the World of Art group evoked the aristocratic rococo style which was shared among the courts of Europe. As the critic and Beardsley enthusiast Sergei Makovskii put it, the World of Art rediscovered the “works of powdered ancestors”—and with them, “the life of the bygone Russia of the country gentry and the court”. To describe this “aesthetic renaissance”, Polonsky has suggested the concept of “double receptivity”—“a renewed receptivity to foreign literatures [and cultures] which led to a receptivity towards a variety of rediscovered pasts, with Russia’s own past among them”.

The reconstruction of the “Westernised” national tradition by the World of Art included, for instance, Benois’ and Diaghilev’s rehabilitation of a taste for “Empire” architecture that had previously been seen as formal and cold, as well as a rediscovery and exhibition of eighteenth-century Russian paintings that had been mistreated as derivative. As a result of Benois’ archival work in Moscow and St Petersburg, and Diaghilev’s research trips to secluded country houses, a nostalgic exhibition of historical portraits from more than 500 owners was staged in 1905 in the Tauride Palace. In this way, the World of Art members were shaping their identity as modern Europeans and, simultaneously, as keepers of the “forgotten” national past. Their work of invention was premised on the act of forgetting that Russia was not a nation but an empire which, by the end of the eighteenth century, had colonised new territories from Poland to Alaska; and that the genteel country of rococo fancies was dependant on the feudal institution of serfdom.

The St Petersburg aesthetes picked Beardsley’s rocaille stylisations, which corresponded with their own version of modernism—the one which relied on the reinvention of the eighteenth-century Russia. Stylistic innovations which accounted for the “wild-fire” spread of Beardsley’s notoriety in the 1890s—his bold use of black and white blots—were less visible in the illustration for MacColl’s article in 1900. It was the next major publication of a set of Beardsley’s designs by Mir iskusstva that focused on the previously understated features of his art: the radically stylised visual language and its Japanese roots as well as the poignant eroticism of his work.
“Inappropriate Reproductions of Acutely Erotic Designs”

Beardsley became the highlight of *Mir iskusstva* for the third time in 1902, when a remarkable set of his nine designs was inserted in the philosophical essay “Lev Tolstoi and Dostoevskii: Conclusion” by the Symbolist writer Dmitrii Merezhkovskii. 54 The essay contained the final part of a study of two major national writers from a religious perspective, which Merezhkovskii was developing and publishing in *Mir iskusstva* from 1900 to 1902. The selection of Beardsley’s drawings opened with the border design for the List of Pictures for *Salome* (1894) and included notorious works of the *Yellow Book* period such as *Lady Gold’s Escort* (1894) and *Messalina and Her Companion* (1895). 55 The blatant incongruity between Merezhkovskii’s text and Beardsley’s images ignited a fierce debate.

As Petr Pertsov, a writer introduced to the World of Art’s circle by Merezhkovskii, recalls, “suddenly, in the most solemn places, extremely inappropriate reproductions of acutely erotic designs by Beardsley began to appear”. 56 Whether Nurok was responsible or Diaghilev himself, Merezhkovskii did not appreciate such an “ironic accompaniment”. 57 Writing under her masculine pen-name “Anton Krainii”, Merezhkovskii’s wife, the poet Zinaida Gippius specified what was considered so “inappropriate” about the illustrations:

> When the conclusion to Merezhkovskii’s article “L. Tolstoi and Dostoevskii” appeared, it somehow happened that on the same pages where the author talks about the matters which for him were evidently the most sacred and awesome—about Christ, about the end of the world—Beardsley’s ominous figures were strolling … A woman-whore in the form of a modern English Messalina makes her way to the lupanar … The monstrous half-human half-devils are grimacing. 58

As both Pertsov’s and Gippius’ commentaries stress, the overt eroticism of the reproductions subverts the “solemn” spiritual subject of the article. While the text discusses the love of Christ, the Church, and the religious ideal of the Russian people, Beardsley’s figures are united by the demonic worship of sexuality.

Gippius singles out the drawing of the notorious Roman empress Messalina, who features in the *Sixth Satire* by Juvenal as an epitome of insatiable lust. In this first of Beardsley’s two designs dedicated to her, the bare-breasted empress is escorted by a single maid to the brothel where she would
fornicate voluntarily with all comers for cash (Fig. 12). The modernity of Beardsley’s menacing femme fatale in the nineteenth-century gown is recognised by Gippius. This image echoes, as Simon Wilson notes, the artist’s depictions of contemporary London night life such as *Lady Gold’s Escort*, also reproduced in the discussed issue of *Mir iskusstva*. The figures of Messalina and her younger companion resemble two characters from the drawing *L’Éducation Sentimentale* described by Max Beerbohm as “a fat elderly whore [...] reading [...] to the sweetest imaginable young girl”. MacColl labels the recurring image of “the wicked old-woman of the many-pouched face” Beardsley’s “most terrible invention”. While the part of MacColl’s essay exploring the unabashed sexuality of Beardsley’s designs was published in 1900 with tamer samples of the artist’s work, the “ironic accompaniment” for Merezhkovskii’s treatise in 1902 provided the previously omitted visual key.
Figure 12.
Digital image courtesy of The British Library Board (all rights reserved).
Figure 13.
Another instance of correspondence between MacColl’s text and Beardsley’s reproductions across the issues of *Mir iskusstva* can be seen in two figures of worshippers, *Volpone Adoring His Treasures* (Fig. 13) and *La Dame aux Camélias* (Fig. 14). The hero of Ben Jonson’s play *Volpone* (1606) is depicted with his hands held as if for prayer and his lustful gaze fixed on the riches piled in front of him. As Beardsley observes in “Volpone Prospectus”, the hero “is a splendid sinner and compels our admiration by [...] the very excess of his wickedness. We are scarcely shocked by his lust, so magnificent is his passion”. 63 While Volpone is posed in sacrilegious admiration of his treasures, the heroine of Alexandre Dumas’ novel *La Dame aux Camélias* (1852), Marguerite Gautier, is depicted at her dressing table. It is adorned with two tall candles; all the powder boxes and beauty articles are depicted with painstaking detail. The portrayal of the courtesan contemplating her reflection is permeated with connotations of voyeurism and fetishism. This
illustration resonates especially with MacColl’s suggestion that Beardsley’s sensibility was that of a fetishist for whom “the toilette became a kind of sacred ritual, with toilette-table set out like an altar”. Reproduced subsequently on pages 123 and 125 in *Mir iskusstva*, the designs for *Volpone* and *La Dame aux Camélias* show the mirror images of two worshippers reversed horizontally. They may, therefore, be seen as two leaves of a pictorial diptych framing Merezhkovskii’s reflections on the “most sacred and awesome”.  

What Pertsov and Gippius do not mention in their comments is that Merezhkovskii’s article was illustrated, apart from Beardsley’s “inappropriate” designs, with thirteen reproductions of Japanese woodblock prints, including the works of Katsushika Hokusai and Utagawa Hiroshige. By placing Beardsley’s drawings after the Japanese designs, the editors of *Mir iskusstva* foregrounded this source of Beardsley’s stylistic innovation. In early 1893, the artist reported that he “struck” for himself “an entirely new method of drawing and composition, something suggestive of Japan”. As Zatlin has revealed in her seminal monograph *Beardsley, Japonisme, and the Perversion of the Victorian Ideal*, learning from lucid, elegant, and easily reproducible *ukiyo-e* designs was crucial for the development of Beardsley’s radical stylistic economy which blossomed during his *Yellow Book* phase and was later replaced by the *ajouré* neo-rococo technique. Beardsley’s link to the *ukiyo-e* tradition is particularly conspicuous in such drawings as *Lady Gold’s Escort*, inspired, as Zatlin observes, by the *shironuku* “technique of picking out a design in white”, as well as *Two Women Golfers and Pierrot as a Caddie* and *La Dame aux Camélia*s.

Beardsley’s images in Merezhkovskii’s article highlight the distinguishing stylistic devices of the artist: simplification, flattening of the surface, and, as Brian Reade puts it, “the use of black areas to dramatise the designs after the manner of Japanese printmakers”. The combination of these methods, showcased in the 1902 volume of *Mir iskusstva*, informed the new approach to graphic design in Russia at the beginning of the twentieth century.

**The Adoption of Beardsley by Bakst: “New Paths for Graphic Art”**

As Nikolai Radlov claims in his book *Contemporary Russian Graphic Design* (1917), “the dawn, which began to shine in the East, lit up with its rays the distant West, and in England, first, under the influence of the Japanese woodblock prints, the book revived and became the book”. In Radlov’s opinion, modern graphic art was founded by William Morris and Beardsley, who adapted Japanese woodblock techniques for book design. Radlov’s argument stems from his earlier critical reflections (1913), which elucidate
the impact of Beardsley’s technique on Russian artists: “the Japanese and
Beardsley opened new paths for graphic art. [...] The admiration of line,
black and white blot, the pattern of dots, in short, the cult of graphic
technique became the foundation of modern graphic art”. It was not the
idiosyncratic “content” of Beardsley’s drawings, as Radlov maintains, but the
“form” which “found followers in almost all nations”; as a result, “to this day,
graphic art [in general] and, in the first place, Russian graphic art remains
‘japonised’”. 71 The perspective offered by the art critic shifts the focus from
Beardsley’s “acutely erotic” subject matter to the formal qualities of his
designs.

The accounts of the Mir iskusstva artists show that this circle associated the
principles of laconic line and conventionalised form with Beardsley. Thus,
Anna Ostroumova-Lebedeva, a member of the World of Art group and a
student of another famous proponent of Japonisme, James McNeill Whistler,
writes of her professional training during the 1890s: “I was especially
interested in the line as such. [...] Simplification and style, this was what I
thought about most”. She asserts that, “graphic design as an art form did
not exist in Russia at that time” and illustrates this point by adding: “I got to
know Beardsley later on, when he was reproduced in the Mir iskusstva
journal”. 72 Like many of her peers, Ostroumova-Lebedeva considered that
modern graphic design emerged in Russia simultaneously with Mir iskusstva
and that Beardsley’s individual style was among the utmost manifestations
of this new “art form”.

The work of Leon Bakst offers an opportunity to explore how designers
responded stylistically to Beardsley’s art. As Natal’ia Lapshina notes,
although there was no official division of roles in relation to Mir iskusstva
between the members of the World of Art coterie, Bakst often functioned as
the periodical’s unofficial art editor, overseeing the choice of illustrations and
the quality of reproductions. 73 He, therefore, had a major role in determining
the visual appearance of the publication. In particular, he designed the cover
for the 1902 run of the journal in which Merezhkovskii’s controversial essay
appeared with Beardsley’s illustrations (Fig. 15). Bakst also produced the
colophon of Mir iskusstva, which was printed on the title-page (Fig. 16). This
highly stylised colophon shapes the figure of an eagle with unmodulated
masses of black and white; the austerity of the design contrasts with the
richly detailed neo-rococo cover, which is composed of complicated patterns
and dotted lines. These two distinct images show Bakst’s absorption of
Beardsley’s “japanesque” manner, typical of the Yellow Book period, as well
as his eighteenth-century style, most prominent in The Rape of the Lock and
The Savoy illustrations.
Figure 15.
Figure 16.
Bakst’s cover also reflects the “acutely erotic” aspect of Beardsley’s work. As Janet Kennedy notes, the design is reminiscent of the title page for the first issue of *The Savoy* (Fig. 17). In Beardsley’s drawing, two masked characters stand at drawn curtains and invite the reader to enter their rococo boudoir. Their veiled faces and theatrical costumes, as well as the mask and fan placed on the table between candelabra, suggest uninhibited sexual play, which can be performed under the cover of false identity. Beardsley reinforces erotic connotations by incorporating half-disguised sexual details, such as the breast-shaped cape on the woman on the left and her hand’s position hinting at masturbation. Likewise, Bakst’s cover is full of suggestive details that engage the viewers in sexual decoding and expose their voyeuristic desire. An oval medallion in the centre resembles a peephole in what could be a wallpaper of a nineteenth-century middle-class living room.
On the opposite sides of the oval’s frame, two figures in eighteenth-century attire are seated: a gallant gentleman with a book and a lady with a pair of rabbits on her lap which repeat the form of her breasts. The ribbons embellishing the medallion as well as the placement of the gallant couple evoke the composition of Beardsley’s curtained title-page. Either masks or deep shadows conceal the faces of Bakst’s characters, again reminiscent of the veiled figures from The Savoy. The eighteenth-century pair guards the entrance into a garden inside the oval where one can discern, behind a temple-pavilion, a nymph fleeing from a shepherd. The design opens an enfilade of playful scenes leading the gaze through a series of revivals: the eighteenth-century masquerade, the idyllic Arcadian garden, and the shadow of antiquity shimmering in its depths. What fashions this eclectic image into the pictorial manifestation of modernity is the use of the technique then seen in Russia as characteristically Beardsleyesque.

Furthermore, Bakst’s cover alludes to the first of Beardsley’s images reproduced in Mir iskusstva in 1899. The details of eighteenth-century dress and Romantic garden architecture, the reading scene and playful artificiality of the design refer to and form an amalgam of Faun Reading to a Woman and Lady on a Sofa. Beardsley’s works borrowed from the visual vocabulary of the rococo revival, which was adopted transnationally at the turn of the century. The same vocabulary was used by the World of Art designers to affirm their modernity. Thus, the subjects of Beardsley’s drawings correlated with the interests of the World of Art members, while his style was absorbed as the guiding principle of modern Russian design. The combination of elegant eighteenth-century linearity and black blot technique, which resulted in the uniquely stylised representation, was circulated via reproductions of Beardsley’s drawings as well as the designs of his Russian followers such as Bakst.

Finally, the case of Bakst—the artist more famous for his paintings, and stage and costume designs—can demonstrate how the adoption of Beardsley’s style facilitated the traversal of boundaries between art forms. In 1902, the same year as Beardsley’s pictures illustrated Merezhkovskii’s article in Mir iskusstva, Bakst painted his Supper, a portrait of a femme fatale in a low-cut black dress and massive hat, seated alone at a table (Fig. 18). Despite stylisation, the model is recognisable as Anna Benois, the wife of World of Art’s ideologue Aleksandr Benois. The woman smiles alluringly and looks straight at the viewer with the cat eyes of Beardsley’s Salome. The closed fan in the woman’s hand, stylised, almost geometrical hair and headpiece, the black oval of the gown’s tail present some of the details linking Supper and Beardsley’s illustration for Salome titled The Black Cape (Fig. 19). Although Bakst would introduce audacious colour in his works for the Ballet Russes, this painting produces an effect of a monochrome graphic design.
The contrast of the woman’s white skin and the black blot of her dress is unmistakably Beardsleyesque, with the sinuous curve of her body intensifying the association with Beardsley’s line.

**Figure 18.**
Leon Bakst, *Supper*, 1902, oil on canvas, 150 × 100 cm. The State Russian Museum, St Petersburg. Digital image courtesy of The State Russian Museum, St Petersburg / Bridgeman Images (all rights reserved).
It is interesting to note that contemporary audiences also saw Beardsley’s ghost looming behind Bakst’s *Supper*. When the painting was displayed at the fifth exhibition of the World of Art in 1903, it caused a scandal. The allusion to the notorious “Beardsley Woman” was picked by the reviewers. For example, the conservative critic Vladimir Stasov wrote in an article titled “Two Decadent Exhibitions”: 

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**Figure 19.**  
A cat in woman’s dress is sitting at the table; her muzzle is in the form of a round plate, in some sort of a horned headwear; [...] her waist, the whole constitution and figure—[are] those of a cat, just as revolting as those of the English poser and freak Beardsley. An unbearable thing! ⁷⁷

Stasov described the woman as an impostor, a decadent monster, while infusing her image with diabolic details such as “horned headwear”. Far from being a complimentary note on Beardsley’s legacy, Stasov’s remark nonetheless sheds light on the popularity of the artist’s imagery and style in Russia: by 1902, they became instantly recognisable by enamoured aesthetes as well as hostile critics from the opposing camp.

Conclusion: A New Watteau for “Our Age”

The World of Art group introduced Beardsley to the wider public through Mir iskusstva, the journal which epitomised modern art in Russia at the turn of the century. The foundation for Beardsley’s reputation was laid by D.S. MacColl’s extensive critical survey and by the continuous circulation of Beardsley’s designs in the periodical. With respect to Beardsley’s styles, Mir iskusstva illuminated the diversity of his techniques, including such extremes as the simplified “japanesques” and the overblown neo-rococo compositions. This combination of the artist’s methods represented in Mir iskusstva resonates with the modernist writer Andrei Bely’s observation (1908): “in the Japanese, Aubrey Beardsley created an image of our age in order to then bring it closer to Watteau”. ⁷⁸ Bely’s remark foregrounds the relevance of Beardsley’s work for the World of Art as the amalgam of eclectic revivalism, openness to foreign cultures, and a paradoxical vision of modernity. At the turn of the century, Beardsley’s art suggested the arrival of a new Watteau: his eroticism and novel graphic language provided a means for fabricating the ajouré image of the past as well as bringing it up to date. Influential as it was, the World of Art’s engagement with Beardsley’s work is but the opening chapter in the broader and richer history of Russian Beardsleyism.

Footnotes


Further in the article, the transliterated name *Mir iskusstva* stands for the journal and the translated World of Art, for the group.

See the first Russian translation of Beardsley’s novella *Under the Hill*; Obri Berdslei, “Pod Kholmom”, Vesy 11 (1905): 30–49. See also a miscellany of Beardsley’s writing and drawings: M. Likiardopulo (ed.), *Obri Berdslei: Risunki, povesti, stikhii, aforizmy, pis’ma, monografii i stat’i o Berdslee*, translated by M. Likiardopulo and M. Kuzmin (Moscow: Skorpion, 1912).


The phrase “Beardsley craze” was often used by Victorian reviewers to describe the period of the artist’s utmost popularity in the mid-1890s; see Aubrey Beardsley, *The Early Work of Aubrey Beardsley* (London: John Lane, 1899), 1. Nikolai Kuz’min uses the phrase in his account (1960), see N.V. Kuz’min, *Stranitsy bylogo* (Moscow: Kniga, 1984), 135. This article uses the Library of Congress system of transliteration (without diacritics) for Slavonic names. There are three exceptions: more common Westernised forms are used for Bely, Benois, and Diaghilev in the main text, while the bibliographical information preserves the Library of Congress transliteration (thus, Belyi, Benua, and Diagilev). The translations from Russian into English are my own.

Kuz’min, *Stranitsy bylogo*, 134.

Bowlt, *The Silver Age*, 47.


Francis Hickes (trans.), *Lucian’s True History* (London: Lawrence and Bullen, 1894).


26 After Beardsley’s death, it was the photogravure print of Beardsley’s portrait of Maupin that Diaghilev tried to purchase through Oscar Wilde, whom he met in Paris in 1898. See Wilde’s letter to Smihers on 4 May 1898 in Merlin Holland and Rupert Hart-Davis (eds), The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde (New York: Henry Holt, 2000), 1060. Smihers issued an ordinary edition of 100 copies of Maupin’s portrait priced at £1—a price which Wilde also refers to. Mark Samuels Lasner, A Selective Checklist of the Published Work of Aubrey Beardsley (Boston: MA: Thomas G. Boss Fine Books, 1995), 73.


28 Ainslie, Adventures Social and Literary, 256.


32 N[urok], “Obri Berdslei”, 16 and 17.


34 Diaghilev, “Autograph Letter from Serge de Diaghilev to D.S. MacColl”.


36 The following designs are reproduced in the issue: cover design for Grey Roses, The Bille-Doux, The Toilet, and The Battle of the Beaux and the Belles; cover design intended for the Yellow Book, Vol. V, The Death of Pierrot, and The Dream; cover design for The Savoy No. 1 and White Peacock in Front of a Fountain and a Tree (chapter heading for Le Morte Darthur); and title-page for Yellow Book, Portrait of Himself, and The Fruit Bearers.


38 For an overview, see Ken Ireland, Cythera Regained? The Rococo Revival in European Literature and the Arts, 1830–1910 (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University, 2006).


44 Ernst, K.A. Somov, 20.


48 Kettering, “Decoration and Disconnection”, 63.


50 Polonsky, English Literature and the Russian Aesthetic Renaissance, 5.

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Belyi, Andrei (1903) Severnaia simfonia. Moscow: Skorpion.
Abstract

This essay considers physical daguerreotype cases from the 1840s and 1850s alongside scholarly debate on case studies, or “thinking in cases”, and some recent physicalist claims about objects in cultural theory, particularly those associated with “new materialism”. Throughout the essay, these three distinct strands are braided together to interrogate particular objects and broader questions of cultural history. It contributes to thinking about daguerreotypes and their cases, but it does so in order to interrogate thinking in cases and objecthood as a legal category. I argue that daguerreotypes have to be understood as image-thing amalgams, paying particular attention to the construction and distinguishing marks on the cases and frames that enclose these images. These cases, particularly those of the patent holder Richard Beard, are situated within legal debates on property and cannot be understood without attention to social relations of capital and class.

Authors

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the audiences who have responded to versions of this paper, particularly those who participated in the Photographic History Research Centre conference at De Montfort in 2013 and at Institut national d’histoire de l’art, Paris in 2018. My sincere thanks also go to Mark Crinson, Alberto Toscano, and Jason Wright; the anonymous reviewers for this journal; as well as Baillie Card and Maisoon Rehani for all their editorial help.

Cite as

Object Cases

Art historians do not know what to do with daguerreotypes. Tens of thousands of these ordinary images were made in Britain between 1841, when the first studios were established in London by Richard Beard and Antoine Claudet, and the later 1850s, at which point the process largely went out of use. Ninety-five per cent of these items, perhaps more, were simple portraits of the middle class.¹ Relatively few of these objects have entered museum collections, which until recently have been preoccupied with collecting “fine photographs”, rather than this kind of commodity image. In this essay, drawing on extensive examinations of objects, I attend to English daguerreotype cases with a degree of attention usually reserved for pictures or texts, relegating the images to the background. My essay seeks to combine a perverse connoisseurship—involving a detailed comparative study of banal commodities—with a critical account of legal cases, situating a warped art-historical ekphrasis in the mesh of the law. This article provides a more detailed description of daguerreotypes and their cases than those previously attempted, but it is not limited to this task. The aim is simultaneously to deploy these object cases as a tool or lens for thinking about some current approaches to art and cultural history. In particular, I raise issues about property and law that complicate some recent ideas about non-human things and the networks they elicit. The approach taken here involves switching focus at various points shifting from daguerreotype cases, to consider the intellectual assumptions underpinning case studies and an engagement with legal definitions of property. Hopefully, the weaving together of these seemingly distinct issues—daguerreotype cases, case study methods, and definitions of property—will prove illuminating and contribute to our understanding of cultural objects.

Of late, the study of photographs has moved beyond art history to encompass a range of disciplines and consideration of commercial images has come more to the fore.² Nevertheless, the history of the daguerreotype remains tangential to these concerns. Traditionally, writers on photography have treated daguerreotypes as pictures—cropping them in reproduction to the edge of the mat or even stripping the mat and presenting them as detached plates. In this virtual sleight of hand, cases are discarded from the visual field and sometimes actually discarded. Some of the newer histories of photography are not so dissimilar: whatever their theoretical differences from the older histories, they too treat daguerreotypes as pictures.³

In wider debates on photography, attitudes have changed considerably, with attention often falling on the seemingly marginal presentational forms of photography. The anthropologist Elizabeth Edwards, whose work has been central to this reorientation in photographic studies, observes that while photographs have been regarded as images and addressed through theories
of representation, there has recently “been an increasing amount of work on photography and the multisensory image”. Edwards’ point is that a focus on representation and the semiotics of the image has largely ignored the ways that photographs are used and presented in albums, mounts, frames, or shoeboxes. In contrast, she advocates a multi-sensory approach that engages with photographs as a “tactile archive” and addresses their imbrication in other technologies of capture, storage, and retrieval. This perspective finds its place in object-orientated cultural studies and Edwards’ own work on photographic mounts and storage boxes is an outstanding example of such work.

I have strong reservations about the so-called “new materialism”, which sits behind much of this newer work on photographic objecthood (both for its marginalisation of image studies and the grander theoretical claims, which sidestep the role of social power in human relations and collapse distinctions between people and nature). Some of my criticisms of this theoretical armature will emerge in the course of this essay, but thinking about photographs as material objects that affect historical events and processes has been highly productive. My text is offered as a contribution to understanding the “tactile archive”, but it is predicated on a different understanding of materialism. In fact, no daguerreotype could ever possibly have existed as a picture: daguerreotypes are not images but things or object-image amalgams (Fig. 1). This is true for all images, whether framed, printed, projected, or instantiated via a screen, but daguerreotypes offer a particularly illuminating case study, pointing to the way that the law en folds all objects.
The daguerreotype process is chemically very stable. Plates tarnish on exposure to air but, unlike the paper prints of the same period, they do not fade or fox; 170 years after they were made, they remain sharp and, turned in the hand, still reveal the “delicate-grey picture” that entranced Walter Benjamin. However, while the process is remarkably stable, the mercury crystals on the surface of the plate are incredibly fragile and physical contact will easily wipe away the image. As a consequence, daguerreotype plates always require protection from contact and they are usually presented under glass and contained in cases or, more rarely in Britain, in frames. The silvered plate is combined with a mat and a glass sheet to form a triple-layered “sandwich”, which is bound together with gummed paper or catgut (Fig. 2). The gilt mat not only provides an image-frame but it also serves the practical purpose of preventing the image-surface of the plate from coming into contact with the protective covering. This sandwich is sometimes inserted into a pan, or tray, for extra protection, before being introduced to the case or frame. On rare occasions, the case is also lined with tin as an additional safeguard (Fig. 3). During the 1850s, a decorative brass “preserver” was introduced, probably as an American innovation, which covers the front edge of the glass and wraps around the sandwich (a preserver is visible in Fig. 38). Cases protect their images and allow for easy storage and transport—as with other fetish forms, this enables them to be held close to the body in a pocket, bag, or locket—but the traces and signs they bear are also integral to daguerreotypes. These artefacts cannot be understood without attending to their cases, but the only available studies of these key components of the daguerreotype are books for collectors, or
studies by historians of an antiquarian bent, presenting examples. As we will see, while these case features serve the practical role of protecting pictures made from mercury crystals, they are also legal marks of property and this must shape our approach to these artefacts.

Figure 2.
While examples by other makers will be discussed, focus here falls on the daguerreotypes produced in the studios of Richard Beard, who was the patent holder for the daguerreotype in the “territory of England, Wales and Berwick-upon-Tweed” (Figs 4 and 5). This is because, as I have argued elsewhere, under patent law, Beard was entitled to license others to operate in his name and he could, and did, specify the components that could be used and how these commodities appeared. Beard largely determined the form daguerreotypes took throughout his patent territory. This legal control produced a situation in which daguerreotypes produced by hundreds of studios throughout the territory were basically interchangeable and should be identified as the work of a collective producer called “Beard Patentee”; this was a form of dispersed authorship under a proper name. 13

**Figure 3.** Ninth-plate, flip-top case with tin lining, 2 x 2½ in. Collection of Steve Edwards. Digital image courtesy of Steve Edwards.
Figure 4.
Beard Patente, Portrait of a Woman, hand-coloured sixth plate, second half of the 1840s, 2¾ x 3¼ in. Collection of Steve Edwards. Digital image courtesy of Steve Edwards.
Daguerreotype Cases

Two types of case were common for housing daguerreotypes: the earliest are flip-top cases that contained ninth-plate daguerreotypes; slightly later, book-style cases were employed to contain various plate sizes (Figs 6, 7 and 8). Throughout much of Europe, daguerreotypes appeared in *passé-partout* frames, rather than cases (Fig. 9).
Figure 6.
Figure 7.

View this illustration online

Figure 8.

View this illustration online

Figure 9.
Historians of photography have largely ignored these widely-produced images and we do not know nearly enough about the production of these integral-objects. Cases of this type long pre-dated daguerreotypes and were used for housing miniature paintings and items of personal jewellery. In the first instance, daguerreotype cases were probably adopted and adapted from these pre-existing items, establishing continuity with the long tradition of English miniature art and association with precious objects. However, due to the thickness of the tripartite sandwich, a deeper case was ideally suited to housing them and, before long, these began to be produced specially for the task. One good account of case fabrication does exist; this is Edward Anthony’s description of large-scale daguerreotype production in his New York manufactory (Fig. 10). Anthony’s New York establishment employed a complex division of labour, including the sexual division of labour, and labour-saving technologies combined with motive power; he claimed that, before completion, every case had been subject to at least twenty distinct labour tasks.  

I have been unable to find any equivalent account of case making in existence for Britain and it seems unlikely that these features of the American system of production were employed. In Britain, daguerreotype cases were probably made at the bench in small workshops, using simple hand tools. Beard maintained a London “manufactory” at Wharf Road, City Road, Islington to produce Wolcott reflecting cameras and supply his studio network with chemicals and other materials; and while it is possible that his cases were made there, it is more likely that he obtained them from the West Midlands manufacturers, who supplied him with other key components such as plates, mats, and pans.  

The most likely source was the manufacturer Thomas Wharton. During the 1850s, some case manufacturers advertised in the photographic press and we learn from these that prices ranged from 15s. per dozen for ninth-plate cases, while mats began at 2s. per dozen.  

Passé-partout frames started from 2s. each, rising to a pound per frame. These items were not cheap! All in all, little can be discovered from written sources and we need to turn to surviving cased images.
Prior to 1844, Beard employed the patent Wolcott camera, which had a reflecting mirror, rather than a lens. This device speeded up exposure times for portraits but, because of the limited zone of focus, it was only possible to produce ninth plates with the Wolcott apparatus. As such, Beard’s early daguerreotypes were invariably ninth plates, housed in red-leather flip-top cases. In the latter part of 1841, or early in 1842, he began to employ a range of mats for use in his daguerreotype sandwiches. It would help greatly to have a full morphology for these components, but we are only now groping towards itemising those that were available. From the known Beard mats, it seems likely that each design was available with either an oval or rectangular aperture (Figs. 11–14).
Figure 11.
Figure 12.
Figure 13.
Beard also offered a range of decorative or fancy mats. These items served a decorative function but they also enlarged the surround of ninth-plate daguerreotypes filling out a larger case and giving the object a more substantial feel in the hand (Fig. 15). Several variant mats appear in these “luxury packs” (Figs 16–20). Customers probably selected the mat they wanted by price from a list, adapting the portrait-commodity to their taste and their purse. In their influential account of “flexible production”, Charles Sabel and Jonathan Zeitlin argue that this kind of variability in components offered a viable alternative to mass production, particularly in trades subject to changing fashions. Flexible production allowed commodities to be adapted and repackaged without the expensive investment in fixed capital. In this way, small producers could modify and diversify their wares to suit fickle patterns of taste using simple, interchangeable components. At the same time that he was using stamped mats, Beard also enclosed his daguerreotype sandwiches in a pan marked with Thomas Wharton’s 1841 design registration. The Wharton pan was exclusive to Beard and any daguerreotype in such a pan must come from one of his studios (Fig. 21). In 1844, Beard ceased to use stamped mats and Wharton pans and other marks appear on his cases, including gilt stamps announcing his studios and, sometimes, a handwritten signature label inside the case, under the sandwich (Figs 22–26).
Figure 16.
Figure 17.
Beard Patentee, Portrait of a Man, ninth plate in luxury pack, mat floral design with rectangular aperture, 1841–1843 (a variant with a Beard Patentee embossed cartouche at bottom), 2 x 2½ in. Collection of Steve Edwards. Digital image courtesy of Steve Edwards.
Figure 18.
Beard Patentee, Portrait of a Man, large ninth plate in luxury lined mat pack, 1841–1843, 2 x 2½ in.
Collection of Steve Edwards.
Digital image courtesy of Steve Edwards.
Figure 19.
Figure 20.
Beard Patentee, Portrait of a Man, ninth plate, fancy vine scroll mat, 1841–1843, 2 x 2½ in.
Collection of Steve Edwards.
Digital image courtesy of Steve Edwards.
Figure 21.
Figure 22.
Ninth plate case, with Beard Patentee signature on blue ink and printed label, after 1843, 2 x 2½ in. Collection of Steve Edwards. Digital image courtesy of Steve Edwards.
Figure 23.
Figure 24.
Case Insignia, “Beard & Foard’s Photographic Institutions. 14 St Anne’s Square, Manchester and 34 Church Street Liverpool. Also at 31 King William St; 34 Parliament Street and the Royal Polytechnic Institution, London”, early 1850s. Collection of Steve Edwards. Digital image courtesy of Steve Edwards.
Beard also sold daguerreotypes in frames. Briefly stated, such frames bear five distinguishing features, which appear in all permutations (Figs 27, 28, and 29).
Figure 27.
Detail of fragment of a Beard advertising label found under a hand-coloured sixth plate, made by a Beard Patentee, late 1840s or early 1850s, 2¾ x 3¼ in. Collection of Steve Edwards. Digital image courtesy of Steve Edwards.

Figure 28.
Beard Patentee, Portrait of a Woman, ninth plate in a japanned frame with dolphin and pheasant ormolu design, 1842, 2 x 2½ in. Collection of Steve Edwards. Digital image courtesy of Matthew Hollow.
Case Studies

So, what is a case? Case histories and case studies occupy a prominent role in approaches to culture and society: from Freud’s “Dora”, “Rat-Man”, and “Little Hans”, to *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll & Mr Hyde* and *The Case-Book of Sherlock Holmes*, or Panofsky’s *Studies in Iconology*, case studies appear as a structuring mode of knowledge (Fig. 30). There are social science manuals on case methodology; and legal primers concerned with case law and medical case histories. Cases also abound in art history and monographs can be seen as a prime form of the case study. An understanding of the forms of thought involved in thinking through case studies and the proximity of this mode to legal procedure will enable a better understanding the image-objects in question.

In recent years “historical epistemologists” have produced compelling studies of “objectivity”, “evidence”, “trust”, “documents”, “facts”, and other modes of knowing and presenting but less attention has been paid to what
Fredric J. Schwartz calls “the culture of case”, or what John Forrester describes as the style of “thinking in cases”. While a host of important writers have thought in the case form, there are two key points of reference for considering the epistemology of case studies. The art and cultural historian, André Jolles included “case” as one of his nine simple words; those mental dispositions or “gestures” that he believed condensed or congealed into enduring forms. As Jolles explains in his book Simple Forms, the “case” is always a matter of judgement or evaluation and therefore a question of “norms”; the case is the point where “a rule, a legal paragraph, changes into an event”. We might also say that these norms or rules are transformed into, or embodied in, objects. It seems fruitful to follow this suggestion and cross or braid physical object cases with thinking in cases and legal cases so that they illuminate one another. Jolles knew that he had to turn to the law to pursue the matter and that the issue did not only apply to the judgement of individuals but also to the weighing up of norms against other norms, cases balanced against cases. In this sense, case studies are examples of what post-Althusserian philosophers call “singularities”, that is, concrete instances that condense broader patterns or “universals”. This essay pursues a similar approach.

Alongside Jolles, the best source for thinking about the “culture of the case” is the work of Michel Foucault. The idea of “examination” appears through much of Foucault’s work during the 1970s, but it is in Discipline and Punish, rather than the currently more fashionable late lectures, where he addresses “the technology of the case”. Foucault’s account of the emergence of a new conception of criminality and of the homosexual subject during the nineteenth century is well known. Briefly stated, he argues that a novel type of subject was defined, whose very identity, or being, is criminal or homosexual. Before this time, Foucault claims, there were no criminal subjects, merely people who committed illegal acts; just as there were no homosexuals, only persons who engaged in prohibited actions with others of the same sex. The deviant or aberrant criminal, or homosexual, was produced as a psychological or biological type under the scrutiny of the disciplines of modern knowledge: anthropology, biology, physiognomy, psychology, and so forth. This account should be well known to historians of photography from the work of John Tagg, Allan Sekula, and others, who mobilised Foucault’s argument to explore the “instrumental images” of the later nineteenth century. Tagg went as far as to suggest that the camera could substitute for the carceral complex.

What is not observed in the photographic literature is that, for Foucault, the writing of cases played a crucial role in defining the new regime of subjects. In Discipline and Punish, he writes: “‘The examination’, surrounded by all its documentary techniques, makes each individual a ‘case’: a case which at
one and the same time constitutes an object for a branch of knowledge and a hold for a branch of power”.  

Distinguishing the case from casuistry or jurisprudence, he continues, “it is the individual as he may be described, judged, measured, compared with others, in his very individuality”.  

Similarly, he wrote that what interested him about the confession at the heart of *I Pierre Rivière*, “was that it was a ‘dossier’, that is to say, a case, an affair, an event that provided the intersection of discourses”. According to Foucault, the technique of writing and constructing cases is central to the constitution of new subjectivities. The “case” represents a particular *dispositif* that renders criminals, or homosexuals, visible and knowable (Fig. 31). The photograph may take its place as an element in a case file, but the camera is not a Panopticon.

![Figure 31.](image-url)

*Figure 31.*

Portrait of James Gill, photograph from the Borough of Kendall, Prisoners’ Photograph Book, 1886. Collection of Kendal Archive. Digital image courtesy of Cumbria Archive Service (all rights reserved).

This is the kind of brilliant account we associate with Foucault. I do not intend to go over the well-trodden discussion of the strengths and weaknesses in his account of power, subjectification, and visibility. Foucault is surely right to claim that cases or dossiers entail judgements, evidence, and individuation. Nonetheless, for the purpose of this analysis, we are confronted with an apparent problem because it is generally agreed that the term “case-law” dates from the early 1860s and “case-history” did not come into common parlance until the later 1870s, after the moment in the period of daguerreotype production in the 1840s and 1850s under consideration. However, criminal and medical cases were discussed in the press considerably earlier. At least from 1820, cases featured in *The Morning Chronicle*: “Lord Portsmouth’s Case” or “The Extraordinary Treatment of a Case of Hydrophobia at Guy’s Hospital”. In “A Lark–Important Case”, we
encounter a discussion of the “law of the case”. 35 John Forrester cites Bishop Berkeley speaking of a medical case in the 1720s. 36 It seems the technology of the case was in play earlier than Foucault assumed.

We have James Chandler to thank for tracing out in detail the emergence of thinking in cases during the period leading up to the daguerreotype patent. 37 Chandler’s big, baggy book on “Romantic historicism” examines the relation between casuistry and cases, to which Foucault alludes. Both casuistry and case have their etymological origins in the Latin casus; Jolles noted this connection. 38 Briefly, casuistry entails a form of moral reasoning that extends established (religious) principles or rules to new instances. Chandler’s book follows the development of the case out of casuistry, from seventeenth-century English Protestantism, through “weighing and pondering”, to the appearance of the case in the nineteenth-century historicism. From Adam Smith’s moral philosophy to the post-Waterloo writings of Bentham, Shelley, Coleridge, De Quincy and, particularly, Sir Walter Scott, he demonstrates that the language of the case emerges: “‘general tenor’, ‘particular passages’, ‘context’, ‘application’, ‘circumstances’, ‘temporizing’, ‘falling away’, ‘case’, ‘cause’, ‘conscience’, and ‘judgment’”. 39 Chandler argues convincingly that the novel of the period can be seen as a form of secularised case and the term itself is frequently invoked in Sir Walter Scott’s Redgauntlet, The Heart of Mid-Lothian, and Ivanhoe. 40 From the second decade on the nineteenth century, cases were made, stated, weighed, or balanced.

One key difference between Jolles and Foucault is that the former believed cases are modelled on trials in which an advocate advances a claim, individuals are cross-examined, witnesses are called, evidence is taken, appeals made and a judgement proffered, whereas Foucault developed his account of power-knowledge, and hence the dossier or case, in opposition to the model of power as law or state form. Nevertheless, a hermeneutics of the case involves investigations of subjects under particular circumstances of disease or legal restraint and it seems helpful here to follow Jolles and view cases as a legal technology. 41 Cases entail both accuser (plaintiff or prosecutor) and defendant. As the etymology of the term suggests, a case always involves a point of contingency in which an occurrence befalls an individual who is, thus, transformed into an example. The case involves the reduction of a norm to a particular instance, and Forrester argues it came into focus as an alternative to the statistical thinking that became a central way of viewing society and nature in the nineteenth century. 42 With Foucault, we might say the case involves the regulated production of a singularity. Throughout this discussion, it is possible to observe a separation
or distance, which produces a specialist judgement predicated on an ideology of neutrality or “objectivity”. The case contributed to the generating middle-class expertise across the disciplines.

If Foucault grasped the central role of the case in producing accounts of modern subjectivity, the difference between Roman law and the distinct English legal code throw up problems for transferring his argument directly to the context of daguerreotype production. Two issues will be highlighted and they will return us to daguerreotype object cases. First, his argument does not travel well: the English common law tradition is based on case histories but is indifferent to subjectivities. The common law tradition evaluates acts, not motives or psychologies. While the disciplines had plenty to say about criminality or homosexuality, what they said had little bearing on legal cases, which attended to acts, not forms of being or subjectivity. From Foucault’s point of view, the English law is a strangely pre-modern episteme. Nonetheless, the UK is not an ancien régime. While this legal tradition may have been wrapped in Latin and the trappings of feudal landholding, it nevertheless proved remarkably flexible and accommodating to what political economists and Law Lords alike called “commercial society”.

Second, Foucault’s account passes over “social property relations”; as Molly Nesbit put it, the “economy is Foucault’s blind spot”. In English case law, this is not tenable. Subjects, insofar as they exist, are defined via property claims. My argument is that daguerreotype object cases are also embedded in legal cases, so this point needs briefly developing. There are three categories, or estates, of property in English legal thinking: first, and most important, is fixed or immovable property. Fundamentally, fixed property involves possession of land or tenement and reflects the predominance of aristocratic property in legal categories. As Sir William Blackstone, one of the most influential English Law Lords, put it: “Land comprehends all things of a permanent, substantial nature”. This is the reason that most forms of illegal appropriation (theft) are regarded in UK law as forms of trespass on another’s estate. The possession of land was, until the end of the nineteenth century, taken to be the guarantee of independence, a stake in the polity and, therefore, the condition of the franchise. (When middle-class women over thirty were enfranchised in 1918, it was on the basis of either a stake in fixed property or higher education.) The second category is chattel property, which refers to movable property that can be alienated and covers everything from personal possessions to vendible commodities. It is worth recalling that, under certain conditions, people can be chattel property, or enslaved persons, and that self-possession is a particular form of property right assigned by the law and state. Pace Liberal political philosophy, self-determination is not an automatic attribute of the subject. It matters who is counted as a political subject, or citizen, and property has usually been
central to that definition. The third estate of property is immaterial property, which covers everything from intellectual property to income on investments, interest on mortgages, or right to tithe payments. Immateral Property is a right to intangible or incorporeal property. The idea of immaterial possession is rooted in Locke’s empirical philosophy of mind and is elaborated in Blackstone’s *Commentaries on the Laws of England*. Blackstone again:

Corporeal [property] consist[s] of such as affect the senses; such as may be seen and handled by the body; incorporeal [things] are not the object of sensation, can neither be seen nor handled, are creatures of mind, and only exist in contemplation.

We can take as an example patent medicine or patent leather, instances where legal protection is offered not to the physical pills or shoes (which are chattels), but to the “recipe” or idea. Similarly, individual daguerreotypes were the chattel property of their purchasers and could be trespassed against or stolen, but the right to make them, the incorporeal property in the daguerreotype process, belonged to Beard and could not be taken from him. It would be a grave error to treat the objecthood of daguerreotypes, or any other “thing”, abstracted from property relations. In capitalist societies, things do not exist on a neutral ontological plane but in and through the mesh of property law, and this applies whether they are commodities or uncommodified objects. Before they contribute to establishing networks, objects are already embedded in social relations.

**Beard’s Legal Cases**

In the opening paragraph of his “Little History of Photography”, Benjamin pointed to the central role of patent law in the emergence of photography. Benjamin’s account is factually inaccurate but he was on the case before others had begun thinking. During the 1840s, Beard conducted six legal cases in his campaign to secure his daguerreotype property rights for the territory of “England, Wales and the town of Berwick-upon-Tweed”. Just as importantly, he stopped others using his property. With the partial exception of his prosecution of Antoine Claudet (Fig. 32), which he lost on a technicality, he won all cases and prevented others working. Two cases were carried out against men he had licensed to use the process—Alfred Barber of Nottingham and Edward Holland of York—but who could not meet their scheduled payments (Figs 33–36). Beard entered into three other lawsuits against persons practising the daguerreotype invention without “written or verbal leave, license or authority”. In 1842, he pursued a
Chancery suit against Edward Josephs of London (aka Edward Joseph Edwards), for illegal infringement of his patent; in the following year, he conducted an action in Chancery against Robert Rankine Bake and William George Chapple of Truro, Cornwall for “using the apparatus and process described in the said specification” to take “portraits miniatures likenesses and representations” and thereby accruing “considerable gains and profits”. Finally, between 1845 and 1849, Beard sought a ruling against the photographic dealers John Wharry Egerton, Jeremiah Egerton, and Charles Bates. During the proceedings, Jeremiah Egerton claimed sole responsibility and conducted a vigorous defence. *Beard v Egerton* is especially interesting and involved a protracted legal case. It is doubtful whether Egerton or his people sold daguerreotypes; he gave lessons and supplied materials, but Beard believed that this too was illegal. There is a nice legal point here about whether Egerton was entitled to sell cotton pads, distilled water, iodine, mercury salts, and silver plates and at what point such everyday items as these shifted from quantity to quality and became a daguerreotype apparatus. Beard also tried to prevent the publication of Egerton’s translation of Lerebours’ instruction manual to the daguerreotype process, believing this too infringed his property rights.

![Figure 32.](image)

**Figure 32.**
Figure 33.
Alfred Barber, Portrait of a Man (shown in case), ninth plate in luxury pack, 1841-1843, 2 x 2½ in. Collection of Steve Edwards. Digital image courtesy of Steve Edwards.
Figure 34.
Alfred Barber, Portrait of a Man (shown out of case), ninth plate in luxury pack, 1841–1843, 2 x 2½ in. Collection of Steve Edwards. Digital image courtesy of Steve Edwards.
Figure 35.
Edward Holland(?), Portrait of Mathew Todd and his Daughter Emily (Matthew Todd was an Inn Keeper in York), ninth plate, 1843 or 1844, 2 x 2½ in. Collection of Steve Edwards. Digital image courtesy of Steve Edwards.
Beard’s legal cases reveal the limits of seeing photographs, or photographic cases, as material things, independent of social relations or structures of power. This focus on objects in law seems a fruitful way of considering the production of subjects in case histories, particularly those subjects known as authors, artists, or photographers. I have in mind the particular form of case history known as the history of photography, but the implications are much wider than this. For instance, unlike much recent work on performativity, self-making, or self-fashioning, attention to this legal history shines a light on the “unfashioning” of the self. This is not only an account of success stories, we should equally attend to those persons who were denied biographies—blocked from working with photography and lost from history. Cultural historians need to attend to barred or obstructed performances. Property law prohibits performance as much as it produces it.

Some historians have argued that self-possession entailed a subject modelled on property claims, but this is not quite right for the period of the daguerreotype under consideration here because, at the time, self-possession required actual property ownership. \(^{59}\) Freedom and independence, respectability and authority, class and gender were entwined in this conception of representation through property. Beard frightened away
or prohibited unauthorised users and women were excluded from making daguerreotypes under the laws of *coverture*. To take just this last point, prior to the Married Women’s Property Acts of 1870 (amended 1874 and 1882), married women were not considered as distinct legal entities. In the words of Blackstone: “By Marriage, the husband and wife are one person in law: that is, the very being or legal existence of the woman is suspended during marriage, or at least is incorporated and consolidated into that of the husband”. Married women were deemed to be “represented” or “covered” by their husband and they were not at liberty to enter into legal contracts. As such, the *femme couvert*, as the married women was known, could not make licence agreements with Beard. Feminist historians have examined the scope for action available to women under such restricted legal circumstances, showing that some room for manoeuvre was actually possible; what they do not refute is the exclusive character of legal contracts. We know of two prominent female Beard licensees, both were *femme sole*, or “uncovered” women: Miss Jane Nina Wigley and Mrs Anne Cooke, who was a widow. It is said that Beard sorely regretted licensing Wigley, when she began advertising as the maker of the best large, coloured daguerreotypes. In the last years of the patent other women were operating studios: more research is needed to establish the conditions under which they worked the invention. One issue is that the work of Wigley and Cooke remains largely invisible today because the cases housing their daguerreotypes were unmarked or carry the features of Beard Patentee, so even the works of the uncovered women are subsumed in his collective authorship.

To escape Beard’s territorial monopoly, some would-be photographers immigrated to places as near as Scotland or the Channel Islands and as far as the USA and Brazil. At least two daguerreotypists took to crime to find a space for themselves: John Henry Greatrex forged £1,300 in banknotes and fled to New York. Unfortunately for him, he was returned by the American authorities and received a sentence of hard labour, dying in custody. Richard Lowe, who ran a high-end daguerreotype establishment in Cheltenham, employed his credit worthiness to obtain expensive items of plate and other valuables (Figs 37 and 38). He then boarded a Liverpool steamer and sailed away, never to be seen again on UK shores. Taking another route, Jabez Hogg—an operator and legal witness for Beard, who subsequently emerged as a strong opponent of the patent restriction—became an eminent ophthalmologist and writer on eye diseases. J.F. Goddard, Beard’s chief chemist and legal witness, ended his days as a pauper living in an almshouse. Are these people’s stories less important than the acclaimed daguerreotypists known from the history books?
Figure 37.
This consideration of the legal ramifications of objects and authorship brings a different slant to recent ideas concerning objecthood. Materialism is again receiving a great deal of attention, largely as a reaction against the “linguistic turn” that dominated cultural theory during the long 1980s and, in some fields, still does so. In the work of the “new materialists” and object-oriented thinkers, attention falls on things or human/non-human hybrids and the networks they shape. At its best, work of this type encourages scrutiny of objects that have escaped attention. This can involve considering the mediating role of objects, which may or may not be commodities, in cementing social networks (the anthropologists’ approach) or demonstrating how simple forms—paper, folders, and labels—or more complex instruments—whether microscopes or cloud chambers—constitute “artefacts of knowledge”. Fine-grained descriptions of objects, how they are made and used, or the connections they enable, are clearly of importance to art historians. 68 The problems arise from the meta-theoretical claims posited by the new materialists: the argument against “critique”; the idea of the “agentic object”; or the advocacy of a “flat ontology”. All these propositions are theoretically unconvincing and politically disabling. 69 What is more, the approach erases crucial dimensions of objects and their role in human affairs.

Taking daguerreotype object-image amalgams as the specimens in question, here I focus on the way that historians of culture, science, and technology working on patents, and often drawing on the work of Bruno Latour and Actor
Network Theory, have claimed that intellectual property is not a species of property but a grant or conventional gift.\textsuperscript{70} This move is made to secure a particular understanding of objects. This is a “physicalist” conception of materialism, which involves attention to matter or objects independent from social relations.\textsuperscript{71} For the historians of patents influenced by the new materialism, property must be a physical possession and immaterial artefacts, created by the law, cannot be deemed property; only immovables or chattels seem to count. However, the distinction between property and a grant or gift does not hold because property is always a legal category and all property—real, chattel, and immaterial—is edged around with “rights” or legal conditions. In a sense, all possession is a grant or an artificial “right”, sanctioned by law and ultimately guaranteed by state force. Land ownership was subject to primogenitor, entail, dower, or thirds; it could be confiscated in cases of treason and, if an owner died intestate, it returned to the crown. Immaterial property is granted for a specific duration, but so are leasehold properties. In English law, an apartment is subject to a leasehold agreement limited to portions of time. Is an apartment not property? A clerical living was also immaterial and fixed for a number of years, so was an assignment of lands, or, in the case of office holders, the right to take fees or emoluments. You are restrained from doing just what you like even with some forms of chattel property, be they heirlooms, enslaved people, or livestock. Married women could not possess any of these things, with the exception of personal heirlooms. As C.B. MacPherson helpfully put it, all forms of property exist “as a right, not a thing: a right in the sense of an enforceable claim to use or benefit of something”.\textsuperscript{72}

I opened by claiming that daguerreotypes were things: image-object amalgams, but this definition now has to be further qualified.\textsuperscript{73} Daguerreotypes are immaterial things or, perhaps, better put, their objecthood is intrinsically embedded in the law of immaterial property. Stated the other way around, daguerreotypes are forms of immaterial property embodied in physical objects, just like patent pills. Beard’s cases are simultaneously physical and immaterial things; they are objects encrusted with social relations. The features of the daguerreotype with which I began: embossed mats, stamped cases, marked ormolu frames and rings, cast and pressed pans, paper signatures, labels, and marked plates were introduced when Beard’s patent was a matter of legal contention. The author “Beard Patentee” migrated from one surface to another. These features are integral to daguerreotype objects as authorial trappings and claims to property. They mark ownership and authority under specified territorial borders, enforced by the institutions of the state. They assert Beard’s control, his property, and his authorship and, just as significantly, they represent closures of possibility for others. A flat ontology cannot account for this “tactile archive” and any account of networks of actors that sidesteps hierarchies of property and capital—racialised and gendered capitalism, or
the nation state—is analytically purblind and descriptively weak. All physical things exist in and through the structures of nation states, or inter-state arrangements and their laws. It is not possible to separate physical objects such as cases from social relations, or property claims embodied in legal cases. Some of the photographers whom Beard prosecuted found ways around the restrictions—Egerton, Barber, Mayall—but most did not. Holland, Chapple, and Rankine Bake were shut down and denied the opportunity to fashion themselves and we have no idea how many others were put off by instructions from Beard’s legal representatives. These men were not allowed biographies. Those who continued to work in the daguerreotype trade were heavily constrained in what they could do and their cases provide constant reminders of Beard’s control and his property. His cases are legal objects that proclaim his property right. Treating daguerreotypes as pictures misses this important dimension of their history, but an account of these things as objects that does not attend to property relations involves a different kind of clouded vision.

**Object Cases as Legal Objects**

In conclusion, let us return to object cases, with the understanding derived from André Jolles and tracked through the law courts of the 1840s, that these items are legal judgements or norms taken on physical form. After 1846, daguerreotype studios emerged proclaiming the names of makers on cases and mats. While this was possible in the territories of Britain outside Beard’s control—Scotland, Ireland, and the Channel Islands—before this date, this was unusual in the area covered by his patent, but there are at least two instances in which licensees stamped cases with the studio name or address; these are the “Photographic Studio—Salop” and the Manchester studio at Ducie Place, subsequently the Royal Exchange, run by Mr Watson, John Johnston, and then the brothers William and John Akers (Figs 39 and 40). The status of these establishments is uncertain, but almost certainly they existed as part of Beard’s business network. The situation changed in around 1846, when cases and mats were more regularly marked with maker’s details. This case-event might be characterised as the rise of the “names” known to photographic history. Not much is understood about the legal arrangement by which they operated. However, the lack of secure information has not prevented some loose speculation, suggesting that Beard’s legal hold on his territory was failing. Historians of photography have insinuated that he over-reached himself with expensive prosecutions, bringing on his bankruptcy of 1849. It is sometimes claimed that he ceased to pursue infringements of his property in the later 1840s, finally leaving the field open to natural talent. Freed from constraint, it is said, photography was finally able to begin its inevitable ascent, as if it were there all the time pupating. 74 This story of Beard’s bankruptcy makes for a nice Whig-Liberal morality tale binding taste and personal liberty to laissez-faire economics. In this romance, Beard
receives his just punishment for restraining the rise of photography and sullying “Art” with commerce. Unfortunately, for the advocates of this ideological story, none of it is true.

Figure 39.
The details of Beard’s bankruptcy case reveal something very different. In October 1849, Beard received a bankruptcy ruling but, in June 1850, he was issued a second-class certificate. 75 This means that, while the court ruled he was partially to blame for his debts, he had settled with his creditors. Throughout the middle of the century, small businesses were notoriously under-capitalised and volatile; typically, a proprietor might expect to trade for two or three years. 76 Bankruptcy was very common during the time, but Bread’s period of insolvency lasted for, at most, seven months. He probably needed to realise some assets to settle his debts and we need to know more about his creditors, but it is also possible that Beard’s bankruptcy was a
financial ruse; it certainly needs looking into with a critical attitude. Interestingly, he was listed in all of the bankruptcy dealings not as photographer but as “metallic plate and picture frame manufacturer”, giving his address as Milman Mews and 34 Parliament Street.  

This may indicate that he had transferred the studios to his son Richard Beard Junior. In the month that Beard filed for bankruptcy, Beard Jr. reopened the studio in Cheltenham, which had been vacant since 1844; subsequently, the license was resold to Lowe. In 1848, Beard Jr. “repurchased the Licence” for Liverpool and, in the following year, opened the studio at 34 Church Street in that city. Whether or not the Beards employed this legal ruse, in the 1851 census, Richard Beard senior was again listed as “photographic artist” and he continued to live on the fashionable Mecklenburgh Square until 1852. During the mid-1850s, Beard was in partnership with Foard in Liverpool and Manchester (Fig. 41). Parkinson, Beard & Co artists worked in Manchester and Ashton-Under-Lyne in 1854 (this may have been Beard Jr.). There is no indication that he surrendered the daguerreotype patent and Beard’s certificate of death lists him as “gentleman”, a period term designating a person who did not work, but who received an income from investments. It is likely that he followed the standard economic pattern for middle-class men at the time, moving from high yield but high-risk manufacturing or trade to a rentier existence as soon as investments were sufficient to yield 5 per cent. Having accrued enough capital, middle-class men tended to retire from active business life and invest their energy and time in charitable works, religious associations, or civic politics. I doubt Beard was any different, but locating photography in the story of “Art” makes it difficult to account for the choices he and others made.
Whatever the truth of the “bankruptcy story”, the evidence suggests that Beard persisted with his existing business model of licensing studios, extending this approach to London, in the later 1840s. In the first instance, the proof comes from cases and frames. The Science and Media Museum collection contains several daguerreotypes, made in Sussex, probably during the 1850s, by the monumental sculptor and sometime daguerreotypist, Thomas Thurlow. What is striking about them is that they are presented in “Beard Patentee” frames. It would be possible to suggest that he was using old stock, but there are other examples. On the back of a striking portrait of a man, there is a large paper label announcing Cornelius Sharp’s studio at London Bridge, also dating from 1846 to 1848 (Figs 42 and 43). There are two things to observe on this frame: first, Sharp’s label proclaims that these are “Beard’s Patent Photographic Portraits” made “Under a License from the Patentee”; and second, there is also a paper disc printed with the word “Patentee” and signed “R Beard”. It is the only known example of this form of Beard’s signature.
Figure 42.
Cornelius Sharp(e), Portrait of a Man with Column and Landscape Background, in japanned papier mâché hanging frame with arched mount and acorn hanging ring, quarter plate, 1846-1848, frame size: 7½ x 6 5/8 in. Collection of Steve Edwards. Digital image courtesy of Steve Edwards.
Figure 43.
Cornelius Sharp(e), Portrait of a Man with Column and Landscape Background, in japanned papier mâché hanging frame with arched mount and acorn hanging ring, quarter plate, 1846–1848, frame size: 7½ x 6 5/8 in. showing reverse with a large label containing the details of Sharp’s studio and a circular handwritten “R Beard” signature, over printed “Patentee” (this is the only known example of the signature disc). Collection of Steve Edwards. Digital image courtesy of Steve Edwards.

One quarter-plate image by Barratt of Regent Street, made between 1846 and 1848, is suggestive of high-end work and is stamped on the case with Barratt’s insignia (Figs 44–46). During this period, Barratt exclusively employed the acclaimed miniature painter Monsieur Mansion for colouring his daguerreotypes. Only four other studios in England were capable of coloured work of this standard: J.J.E. Mayall, William Kilburn, and Antoine Claudet, all working on Regent Street or the Strand, and John Akers in Manchester. Arguably, Barratt’s specimen is superior to many daguerreotypes by Kilburn. On this basis, Barrett should occupy a prominent place among the names. Open up this daguerreotype, remove the plate
sandwich, and what do we find—a “Richard Beard Patentee” signature! Another known Barratt daguerreotype in the St Albans Museum bears the same studio insignia on the case and, under the plate, there is another Beard signature label. These portraits by Barratt and Sharp pre-date the bankruptcy proceedings of 1849, but they are important examples of the emergence of named studios given as evidence for Beard’s slackening grip. Yet, case and frame proclaim Beard’s control.

Figure 44.
Further evidence for this pattern of Beard’s continuing use of the patent and strategy licensing of studios can be found in the regional press. To cite only examples after Beard’s “bankruptcy”: as noted, in 1849 Beard repurchased
the licence for the Cheltenham studio, which he sold to Richard Lowe, who traded there from 1850–1856, when he absconded. Arthur Hall, was “Licensed by the Patentee”, to work in Gloucester, 1849–1850. George Brown, made “Beard’s Photographic Miniatures” in Newcastle from 1850–1855. William Pumphrey was “Licensee” in York in 1850 (Fig. 47). J. and J. Blake ran a studio in Davenport from 1851 by “Queen’s Royal Letters Patent”. Frederick Worcester worked in Coventry in 1852 “by arrangement with the Patentee”. Thomas Chapman Browne operated his “Patent Photographic Portrait Establishment” at Market Place, Leicester from 1852–1855 (Figs 48 and 49). M. Theodore Brunell, “Royal Coat of Arms” advertised a “provincial tour” in 1853. Of course, we know Nicolaas Henneman purchased a license from Beard to supplement his work with Talbot’s paper prints. From this evidence, we can see that Barratt and Sharp—and almost certainly Thurlow—and these other men were still working by Beard’s agreement. Despite the appearance of names on these daguerreotypes, and in the history books, it seems that Beard retained tight control. These “names” were licensees and it is likely that the commodity-image-things they made were “Beard” daguerreotypes. It is a scandalous proposition, but this may even be true for such celebrated photographers as J.J.E. Mayall and Edward Kilburn (Figs 50 and 51).
Figure 47.
William Pumphrey, Portrait of a Man, ninth plate, circa 1850, 2 x 2½ in. (the maker’s mark is embossed on the mat). Collection of Steve Edwards. Digital image courtesy of Steve Edwards.

Figure 48.
Figure 49.
Figure 50.
Coda: The Case of Antoine Claudet

Now the final case or, to be precise, four of them (Figs 52–59). This is a set of four portraits by Antoine Claudet—they are versions of the same man and woman and may have been betrothal portraits (no wedding ring is visible). The date “1843” is scratched on the back of one plate and that seems right. There is much to say about the images, but I am interested in the cases. Claudet was Beard’s main rival in the capital, but he was compelled by law to pursue a distinct approach to business. His cases differ markedly from those of Beard Patentee and indicate the extent to which these object-image amalgams are legal constructions, as much as they are physical things. The case interiors for these four portraits are all the same: a bluish-red velvet pad and an etched matt. The cases are well made with hinges and superior leather coverings, showing little sign of warping or splitting. Each case is also unique. They vary in colour and surface decoration and the Adelaide Gallery insignia is present on three but absent from the fourth. One portrait of the man comes in a burgundy leather case with no decoration except the gilt stamp: “Claudet’s ‘Daguerreotype Process’. Adelaide Gallery Strand”. The form of this stamp is a band, or probably a broach, topped by the British crown indicating royal patronage. The second male portrait appears in a calf-brown case—perhaps it is a little redder than this suggests—with three embossed bands at the border. The central panel again bears the gilt studio stamp. Whereas the other three cases are equipped with double hook-and-eye fasteners, this has only one positioned centrally. One picture of the young woman is presented in an extraordinarily unusual green case. The leather is mottled and it has the same bands at the edge. The central panel
contains an embossed cartouche design, which frames the Adelaide Gallery stamp. The final case, also containing a portrait of the woman, is in a dark-plum coloured mottled leather; again, there is the familiar bordering edge with a distinct cartouche pattern, but significantly, it is not stamped with Claudet’s studio insignia.

Figure 52.
Antoine Claudet, Portrait of a Man, with Elaborate Painted Background (showing case), in red-domed case with embossed border and Adelaide Gallery stamp, 1843, 2½ x 3¼ in. Collection of Steve Edwards. Digital image courtesy of Steve Edwards.
Figure 53.
Antoine Claudet, Portrait of a Man, with Elaborate Painted Background (showing photograph in case), in red-domed case with embossed border and Adelaide Gallery stamp, 1843, 2½ x 3¼ in. Collection of Steve Edwards. Digital image courtesy of Steve Edwards.
Figure 54.
Antoine Claudet, Portrait a Man, with Elaborate Painted Background (showing case), in red-brown case with embossed border and Adelaide Gallery stamp, marked on the reverse “1843”, 2½ x 3¼ in. Collection of Steve Edwards. Digital image courtesy of Steve Edwards.
Figure 55.
Antoine Claudet, Portrait of a Man, with Elaborate Painted Background (showing photograph in case), in red-brown case with embossed border and Adelaide Gallery stamp, marked on the reverse “1843”, 2½ x 3¼ in. Collection of Steve Edwards. Digital image courtesy of Steve Edwards.
Figure 56.
Antoine Claudet, Portrait of a Woman, with Elaborate Painted Background (showing case), in unusual green-leather case with decorative scroll design and Adelaide Gallery stamp, 1843, 2½ x 3¼ in. Collection of Steve Edwards. Digital image courtesy of Steve Edwards.
Figure 57.
Antoine Claudet, Portrait of a Woman, with Elaborate Painted Background (showing photograph in case), in unusual green-leather case with decorative scroll design and Adelaide Gallery stamp, 1843, 2½ x 3¼ in. Collection of Steve Edwards. Digital image courtesy of Steve Edwards.
Figure 58.
Antoine Claudet, Portrait of a Woman, with Elaborate Painted Background (showing case), in brown-leather case with decorative scroll (no stamp), 1843, 2½ x 3¼ in. Collection of Steve Edwards. Digital image courtesy of Steve Edwards.
A great deal of attention has gone into the pose of the figures, the lighting, and selection of the background and the cases are well crafted, but Claudet evidently did not set much stock by the regular presentation of his portrait-commodities. This is important and it suggests a distinct business pattern. As we have seen, the marks of authorship are fixed for the products of “Beard Patentee”. The legal loophole that allowed Claudet to evade the patent came with a particular qualification, restricting him to the use of “three complete sets of apparatus”. Unlike Beard, Claudet could not expand and conduct multiple business outlets; in fact, he only ever ran two photographic studios at any one time. Standardisation—even flexible production—was irrelevant to his mode of operation. In this set of pictures, Claudet’s presentation varies to the extent that one case does not even carry the studio’s insignia. For him, taste and distinction mattered much more than consistency in case design. The absence of noteworthy case features, or their irregular variation, should also be understood as legally regulated characteristics of property.

Claudet’s particular approach to self-making meant that regularity and standardisation were not central to his operation. He was able to fashion a glittering career for himself, creating refined images and serving elite customers; ultimately, he was made F.R.S. and received the Legion of Honour. This, though, was not simply a matter of a superior artistic vision; it was the strategy of an exception that emerged from a loophole in the law. Historians of photography have perpetuated a simple misrecognition, treating contrasting business strategies and legal opportunities (resources)
as if they were matters of “Art” or sensibility. In part, they have done so because they have not attended to cases, which, like all objects, are at once physical and legal things.

Footnotes

1 Throughout this essay, I will be referring to various plate sizes, so it is worth bearing in mind that a full plate, based on the size of a Victorian standard glass sheet is 6 x 8.5 inches. A full plate could be subdivided to create smaller plates. Sizes are: half plates (4.25 x 5.5 inches); quarter plates (3.25 x 4.25 inches); sixth plates (2.75 x 3.25 inches); ninth plates (2 x 2.5 inches). Rarely, sixteenth plates are encountered (1.375 x 1.625 inches).

2 For position statements, see Elizabeth Edwards, “Photography’s Default History is Told as Art—It Shouldn’t Be”, The Conversation, 23 February 2015, 3–4, [http://theconversation.com/photographys-default-history-is-told-as-art-it-shouldnt-be-37734](http://theconversation.com/photographys-default-history-is-told-as-art-it-shouldnt-be-37734), accessed 24 October 2019. See also Geoffrey Batchen, “Vernacular Photographies”, History of Photography 24, no. 3 (2000): 262–271. Walter Benjamin had grasped the problem in 1931; he wrote: “...it was this fetishistic and fundamentally anti-technological concept of art with which theoreticians of photography sought to grapple for almost a hundred years, naturally without the smallest success. For they undertook nothing less than to legitimize the photographer before the very tribunal he was in the process of overturning”. Walter Benjamin, “Little History of Photography”, Selected Writings, Vol. 2, 1927–1934 (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1999), 508.


10 I have found two examples where a card fillet is inserted under the mat, resulting in the best-preserved plates I have seen.


Beard purchased the patent to the daguerreotype process for England, Wales, and Berwick-upon-Tweed in 1841. A separate patent was required for Scotland and for Ireland and he did not acquire these. Beard ran three London studios in the fashionable West End and licensed other persons to practise the daguerreotype process throughout his legal territory. For Beard’s patent, see my essay: “Beard Patentee: Daguerreotype Property and Authorship”, *Oxford Art Journal* 36, no. 3 (2013): 369–394.


We know that Beard sourced his silvered plates from the Birmingham firm: G. H. & R. Elkington, who were patentees for the electroplate process. In a lecture at the Royal institution, J.F. Goddard reported that Beard’s plates were manufactured in Birmingham under the direction of Johnson; see J.F. Goddard, “Application of the Daguerreotype to the Taking of Likenesses from the Life”, *The Polytechnic Journal* 4 (April 1841): 248–250; and in *The Chemist* 2 (May 1841): 142–143. Some writers have taken this to mean manufactured by Wharton, who was certainly engaged in electroplating during the 1840s. However, the previous week in a lecture at the same establishment, J.T. Cooper stated that Beard obtained his plates from G. H. & R. Elkington, who were the patentees for the process. Birmingham was the focal point for the metal plating trades, which may be a reason for the confusion. Beard almost certainly dealt with the patentee; see J.T. Cooper, *The Polytechnic Journal* 4 (April 1841): 251–253. However, the subcontracting process in Birmingham means we can’t be certain. For this, see Clive Behagg, *Politics and Production in the Early Nineteenth-Century* (London: Routledge, 1990).


We know that in one instance Wharton wrote to Beard warning him of contact from the “pirate” Edward Josephs, who wanted to procure “samples of various patterns of cases ... at the lowest price”. Beard cited this letter in his legal proceedings against Josephs for patent infringement. Chancery Proceedings, *Beard v Josephs*, C13/475/894, Public Record Office, London.

As is well known, Carlo Ginzburg cited Freud and Conan Doyle, along with the connoisseur Carlo Morelli, as examples of medical semiotics. In each instance, these men were medical practitioners and Ginzburg argues they built their evidence—“clues”—on the idea of the medical symptom. Medical diagnosis is evidently a type of the “case”; Carlo Ginzburg, *Clues: Roots of an Evidential Paradigm*, *Myths, Emblems, Clues* (London: Hutchinson Radius, 1990), 96–125.


André Jolles, *Simple Forms* (London: Verso, 2017). Jolles was one of the highly gifted generation of right-wing scholars in the 1930s. A colleague of Gadamer, he joined the NSDAP (National Socialist German Workers’ Party).

Jolles, *Simple Forms*, 139

For an overview, see Luca Basso, *Marx and Singularity: From the Early Writings to the Grundrisse* (Leiden: Brill, 2012).


difference is the determining instant of authoritative judgement. In his "Foreword" to Event', 333. This is helpful, but Beard's legal cases consist of exactly these same materials. What makes the testimonials, witness accounts, examination results, and expert opinions"; Chrostowska, 'A Case, an Affair, an occasion, opportunity—all of which point to a moment of contingency. Forrester, "If p, Then What?"; and Ian Hacking, Simple Forms Jolles, 'Combinatory genre' whose "ostensive objectivity stems from its lack of unified perspective"; it is "an accrual of testimonials, witness accounts, examination results, and expert opinions"; Chrostowska, "A Case, an Affair, an Event", 333. This is helpful, but Beard's legal cases consist of exactly these same materials. What makes the difference is the determining instant of authoritative judgement. In his "Foreword" to I, Pierre Rivière, Foucault is attentive to this moment, cf. 200. See also Michel Foucault, "About the Concept of the 'Dangerous Individual' in 19th-Century Legal Psychiatry", International Journal of Law and Psychiatry 1 (1978): 1-18. For a recent Marxist engagement with Foucault, see Jacques Bidet, Foucault With Marx (London: Zed Books, 2016). Still, the best account is Nicos Poulantzas, State, Power, Socialism (London: Verso, 1980) and for an excellent discussion, see Bob Jessop, "Pouvoir et Stratégies chez Poulantzas et Foucault", Actuel Marx 36 (2004): 89-107. "Lord Portsmouth's Case", The Morning Chronicle, Saturday 1 March 1823; or "The Extraordinary Treatment of a Case of Hydrophobia at Guy's Hospital", The Morning Chronicle, Monday 4 October 1824. "A Lark—Important Case", The Morning Chronicle, Friday, 10 July 1829. Forrester, "If p, Then What?", 14. James Chandler, England in 1819: Politics of Literary Culture and the Case of Romantic Historicism (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1998). I would like to thank Luisa Calé for drawing my attention to Chandler's work. Jolles, Simple Forms, 158. The term case derives from the Latin casus: falling, a fall; accident, event, occurrence; occasion, opportunity—all of which point to a moment of contingency. Occasio (juncture) is a derivative of casus and is the root of the Old English "occasion". It seems right to acknowledge that case as container, derives from Old French chasse meaning case or reliquary; Modern French chasse. The Latin root is probably capsà, box or repository. Both share a sense of enclosing or encaasing. My thanks to Alberto Toscano for suggesting the etymological connections and for pointing me to Simple Forms. Chandler, England in 1819, 215. Chandler, England in 1819, 218-225. See also G.A. Starr, Defoe and Casuistry (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1971); and J. Paul Hunter, Before Novels: The Cultural Contexts of Eighteenth-Century English Fiction (New York: W.W. Norton, 1990). On cases in law and medicine, see Forrester, "If p, Then What?"; and Warwick Anderson, "The Case of the Archive", in Joy Damousi, Birgit Lang, and Katie Sutton (eds), Case Studies and the Dissemination of Knowledge (London: Routledge, 2019), 15-30. Forrester, "If p, Then What?"; and Ian Hacking, The Taming of Chance (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990). Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison, Objectivity (New York: Zone, 2007). Mary Poovey, Making a Social Body: British Cultural Formation, 1830-1864 (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago 1995); Robert Grey, The Factory Question and Industrial England 1830-1860 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); and Steve Edwards, "Factory and Fantasy in Andrew Ure", Journal of Design History 14, no. 1 (2001): 17-33. See Molly Nesbit's brilliant "What was an Author?", Yale French Studies 17 (1987): 229-257. The comment on Foucault and the "economy" is to be found on 204. Cf. Alan Hunt and Gary Wickham, Foucault and Law: Towards a Sociology of Law as Governance (London: Pluto, 1994), 59-60. Hunt and Wickham offer a good account of Foucault's distinction between negative law (which he associates, somewhat oddly, with the body of the King in the Absolutist State) and modern, positive capillary power. As such, the place of the law in modern power and governance occupies a marginal role in his work. The central examples are "Two Lectures" and, in the same volume, the long lecture 'Truth and juridical Forms"; Michel Foucault, "Two Lectures", in Colin Gordon (ed.), Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews & Other Writings 1972-1977 (New York: Pantheon, 1980), 78-108. Foucault's libertarian antipathy to the state has not been weighed enough; yet arguably, it is what generated his ambivalent attitude to neoliberalism and provided an opening for the nouveaux philosophes. On this, the pioneering criticisms are: Peter Sedgwick, PsychoPolitics (London: Pluto, 1982); and Peter Dews, "The Nouvelle Philosophie and Foucault", Economy and Society 8, no. 2 (1979): 127-171.


Domenico Losurdo, *Liberalism: A Counter-History* (London: Verso, 2011). One issue with the “new materialism” is that some people really can be treated as objects: such as treating women as “sex objects” and enslaved people are legally treated as things. In this regard, a flat ontology seems deeply questionable in avoiding racialised and gendered violence.


For an attempt to deal with patent law, see Louise Purbrick, “Knowledge is Property: Looking at Exhibits and Patents in 1851”. *Oxford Art Journal* 20, no. 2 (1997): 53-60. In photography, work has been confined to copyright. In addition to Edelman and Nesbit, see Elizabeth Anne McCauley, “‘Merely Mechanical’: On the Origins of Photographic Copyright in France and Great Britain”, *Art History* 3, no. 1 (2008): 57-78.

Benjamin, “Little History of Photography”, 507. His claim is that the state stepped in with pensions, when the inventors encountered problems with the patent process.

For a fuller account, see my “Beard Patentee: Daguerreotype Property and Authorship”. The history and issues are more fully developed in my forthcoming book: *Daguerreotypes: Patents, Persons and Portraits*.


The Times, 14 June 1849, 1d; Correspondence from Thomas Malone to William Henry Fox Talbot, 15 February 1850, Document no. 6303, British Library Talbot Collection, LA50-12. Transcribed by *The Correspondence of William Henry Fox Talbot Project*: http://foxtalbot.dmu.ac.uk/letters/transcriptFreetext.php?keystring=wigley&keystring2=&keystring3=&year1=1800&year2=1877&pageNumber=0&pageTotal=1

I would be delighted to vouch for her claim but as yet I have not found an example of her work.

The *London Post Office Directory* lists: Matilda Hamilton in 1848; Mrs Susannah Smith, 1853–1854 (she also appears to have worked in Norwich); Mrs Maria Clarke, 1854–1856; John Firth (with Mrs Firth in attendance for ladies), 1854–1855; Helen Joyce & Son, 307, High Holborn, 1854–1855—possibly daguerreotypes. Eliza Emma Wilson Burrows, the wife of surgeon and dentist Walter Burrows, worked in photography while she was married. She had a studio at 12 Somerset Place, Commercial Road, Whitechapel, 1853–1859 and is listed in the London Directories earlier in 1851. Walter Burrows was a parochial vaccinator; Miss Rosa A. Bourdon, 7 City Terrace, City Road, 1854–1856; Miss Miranda Cannon, 18 King William St (Clauet’s former studio) 1853–1854; and Miss Mina Peyton (traded as Mina’s), 333A Oxford Street, 1854–1855. It is not certain that they all worked the daguerreotype process; see Michael Pritchard, *A Directory of London Photographers*, 1841–1908 (Watford: PhotoResearch, 1994).


*The London Gazette* 3 January 1849, 2; 17 November 1849, 2; and 14 September 1850, 2.

*The London Gazette*, 14 June 1849, 1d; Correspondence from Thomas Malone to William Henry Fox Talbot, 15 February 1850, Document no. 6303, British Library Talbot Collection, LA50-12. Transcribed by *The Correspondence of William Henry Fox Talbot Project*: http://foxtalbot.dmu.ac.uk/letters/transcriptFreetext.php?keystring=wigley&keystring2=&keystring3=&year1=1800&year2=1877&pageNumber=0&pageTotal=1

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For a good example, see Tim Ingold, *Making: Anthropology, Archaeology, Art & Architecture* (London: Routledge, 2013). However, an art historian would want to point out that the discipline has its own exemplary version in Michael Baxandall’s *The Limewood Sculptors of Renaissance Germany* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1980).


I want to avoid the term “hybrid” here, due to both its racist origin and the current Latourian resonances. Amalgam comes from metallurgy and is less biological.

This is not unlike the account of the rise of capitalism that omits the violence of the “so-called primitive accumulation” and imagines that, once the guilds and other feudal restrictions were removed, the market could simply spread its resplendent wings.

Her Majesty’s Commissioners authorised a fiat of bankruptcy against Beard on 8th day of October 1849; see *The London Gazette*, 28 December 1849, 3970. He was awarded the second-class certificate on 9 March 1850; see *The London Gazette*, 7 June 1850, 1632.

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Introduction by

Sria Chatterjee, Institute of Experimental Design and Media, FHNW, Basel and Max-Planck Kunsthistorisches Institut Florenz

The Arts, Environmental Justice, and the Ecological Crisis: A Provocation

Colonialism/Capitalism

The history of British art abounds with an interest in the environmental, especially landscape paintings that embody the pastoral and the rural, cloud studies, and stormy skies. John Barrell’s *Dark Side of the Landscape* published forty years ago, convincingly argued that landscape paintings that we interpret almost immediately as idyllic, in fact emerge “from a world of social and economic relations that are anything but idyllic”. Writing about Gainsborough and Constable, among others, Barrell’s leftist critique of the English pastoral (following E.P. Thompson) urged viewers to see in the harmony that pastoral painting propagated between human and non-human, land and labour, the “evidence of the very conflict it seems to deny”. Beyond the English working class, the discipline of art history, especially British art history, is a product of the nineteenth century and thoroughly entangled with histories of colonialism and capitalism—and slavery.

The art critic, John Ruskin’s interest in the geological sciences and his mineralogical collection used to teach design aesthetics, architecture, and geology is well known. In *Modern Painters* (1843–1860), Ruskin pressed artists to study geology. According to Ruskin, landscape possessed “vital truth” by which it simultaneously conveyed the past, the present, and the future. Metal mining in the UK and in the colonies were at its peak when Ruskin was writing. Kathryn Yusoff has recently updated what Ruskin called the “truth of the earth” by showing us how geology (and its fossil objects) is entwined with processes of racialization through speciation and notions of progress, and how it is a mode in which racial logics have been inscribed within the material politics of extraction, continuing to constitute lived forms of racism (from eugenics to environmental racism). Making the link between spatial dispossession of land (for extraction) and disposessions of persons in chattel slavery (as another form of spatial extraction), Yusoff has argued that geology is historically situated as a transactional zone, in which mineral-as-property and person-as-property were one and the same. Conversations with the literary and gender studies scholar Katherine McKittrick have also taught me to think about how a direct line between the race thinking of slavery and our contemporary environmental predicament can end up...
mistreating the complexity of Black time by obscuring Black time. In privileging non-personhood as an origin story, we run the risk of undermining histories of rebellion, multiplicity, and Black life.  

The Anthropocene is a geological term with deeply political implications. The marking of the Anthropocene has been roundly critiqued for itself being a product of colonial geology, in which spikes are named after a universalizing Anthropos, while the Anthropocene is best viewed as a racial process that has produced and continues to produce racially uneven vulnerability and death. Alternative terms such as Capitalocene (coined by Jason Moore) insist that it is not humanity as a homogenous acting unit that can be held responsible for the Anthropocene but accumulation and investment of capital in the fossil economy in certain parts of the Western world that triggered an epochal change. Françoise Vergès’ “racial Capitalocene” (following Cedric Robinson) critiques Dipesh Chakrabarty’s notion of a universal, undifferentiated humanity that has become a geological force to regard the Anthropocene squarely within colonialism and capitalism’s racializing processes. The Plantationocene (coined by Anna Tsing and Donna Haraway) mobilizes this concept alongside longer histories of Black, Caribbean, and Indigenous radical thought as well as multispecies ecologies.

The British Empire was built on tobacco, sugar, and cotton—tropical crops that could not, at the time, be grown at home. The plantation is a transformative site and process in human and natural history. Visual and environmental histories of plantations expose the structures of power embedded in imperialist, capitalist, and racial formations and the enduring legacy of plantation corporatism that persists today and continues to give rise to modern slavery, growing land dispossession, and accelerated species loss. As Saidiya Hartman has shown, “emancipation” does not in fact end slavery but extends its power through “new forms of bondage” and new modes of thought embedded in our concepts of the human. Settler colonialism is an unfinished and continuously evolving project and the intimate interrelationships between transatlantic slavery, land grabs, genocide, ecocide, fossil fuel economies, and the financialization of nature continue to shape the global present.

The long and overlapping histories of natural history, slavery, and racism come together illustratively in Britain’s museums. The practice of collecting animal and plant specimens that were brought back to England to be studied and later displayed in natural history museums were collected by ship surgeons and captains who worked in the slave trade—often employed by armchair naturalists and collectors who never left London but pried specimens from the farthest reaches of Africa and Latin America (to which
only slave ships travelled). Once in Britain, plants and seeds from the colonies were often replanted to create hugely profitable plantations in British colonies and formed the fundamental basis of domestic botanical science. Botanists, botanical gardens, and museums became “the base for all economies” and “agents of empire”. On the flipside, as Ursula K. Heise has argued, environmental humanities perspectives have sometimes slipped into an essentialist investment in “marginalized” or “local places” as somehow having a more pure, authentic, or real relationship to their geographies than the “Western” or “globalist” perspective. This, however, is a false dichotomy and, as Heise advocates, it is imperative to consider that “both cultural and ecological systems are imbricated in global ones”. Nothing, as Tommy Orange writes, “is original, everything comes from something that came before, which was once nothing”. British history and art history are similarly blips in longer and complex histories of domination and settlement. The national adjective in British Art Studies is therefore a misnomer in many ways, asking us to critically rethink what national art histories mean in the British or other contexts.

The ecological crisis is, therefore, an intersectional one. The etymological roots of ecology makes us aware of the primacy of relationality, in this case of organisms to one another and to their physical surroundings. The ecological crisis too is an irrefutably relational constellation in which overlapping systems of oppression need to be considered in constant dialogue with the past, present, and future. What does this mean for art historians? The art-historical theoretical toolkit has long separated critical approaches whereby artworks or epochs are studied through feminist critique or Marxist critique or post-colonial theory but rarely applied simultaneously. Does the intersectional nature of the ecological crisis demand a deep transformation in the way art history is structured and taught?

On and Against Representation

Artists, and, in turn, art historians and critics have at different points paid particular attention to what lies beneath and around them. However, the current ecological crisis has exacerbated the ways in which we pay attention and what we pay attention to. As the artist moves between ethnographer (Foster) to activist (McKee, Demos), what are the stakes of representation and how has the way artists and art historians understand representation changed?

The history of British and more broadly Western art has seen natural forms and forces variously as inspiration for technical and emotive representation. For instance, for Edmund Burke, painting was an emotive proxy for that
which it depicted and John Constable, whose cloud studies were investigations into problems of depth, space, weight, and form, and who diligently read early meteorologists such as Thomas Forster and Luke Howard, saw the sky as an “organ of sentiment”. While modernists such as Paul Nash and Henry Moore turned to natural forms and processes as a spur to abstraction, land art in the 1960s and 1970s used the substrate earth—soil, rocks, rivers to create artistic interventions as viewers more aware about their relationships to their earthly environments. Some British land artists such as Hamish Fulton and Richard Long preferred to “take only photographs and leave only footprints”, gently critiquing the intrusiveness of land art practices in the United States. The representation of nature—in one form or the other—then has been the primary way artists in the Western world have communed with it. At the same time, pictorial representation has also traditionally served as the vehicle for imperial landscapes and worldviews.  

The representation of nature as Other, however, is a Euro-American construct. Indigenous Australian paintings, for example, store stories and records of the Dreamings, portraying how the earth came into being, and how the land and its creatures were created and learned to coexist. In other words, they hold an informational structure that makes space for geological and cosmic time—and creates ways of knowing and seeing the world at multiple scales. Even in scholarly endeavours such as post-humanism, where scholars in the Euro-American context work towards a non-anthropocentric worldview, in continuously referring to a foundational ontological split between nature and culture as if it is universal, post-humanist theories erase Indigenous epistemologies.  

Contemporary artists have approached the ecological crisis in a variety of ways. Some artists such as Olafur Eliasson have opted for grand (carbon-consumptive) gestures in works such as *Ice Watch*, which transported thirty blocks of glacial ice from Greenland to London’s Southbank in 2018. Galleries and public spaces, in the last five years, have been increasingly taken over by artistic projects that try to “represent” the dangers of a warming world and to communicate the effects of rising sea levels, burning forests, and accumulating plastic and toxic waste. Prizes such as the Grantham Art Prize at Imperial College, London commission original works by artists in collaboration with climate researchers with the aim of visualizing and communicating the climate crisis to the broader public. The geographer Erik Swyngedouw’s warning that environmental action has been co-opted by a neoliberalism enthralled by geo-engineering, sustainable innovations, and technological fixes which do nothing to challenge the very conditions that precipitate the ongoing destruction, is one to heed when asking to what ends these means of visualization and representation aim. T.J. Demos has argued that the Anthropocene rhetoric, through images and texts, often acts
as a mechanism of universalization, which obscures the accountability of the military-state-corporation apparatus. It allows instead for a kind of eco-catastrophical aesthetic, which does not speak to the longer systemic capitalist processes and the complex entanglements of corporations, governments, and institutions.  

Figure 1.
Jussi Parikka and Abelardo Gil-Fournier, Seed, Image, Ground, still, 2020, video essay. Digital image courtesy of Jussi Parikka and Abelardo Gil-Fournier (all rights reserved).

Other contemporary artists and designers have opted for research-oriented, forensic practices, which rethink representation to offer tools of resistance, making visible patterns of structural violence and difficult historical trajectories in multispecies contexts that would otherwise go unnoticed. For instance, the London-based group Forensic Architecture’s project Ecocide in Indonesia (2017) investigated the 2015 fires in Kalimantan and Sumatra that consumed forests and farmland through fieldwork and satellite image analysis. The results of this investigation established that drainage and “monocropping” by agricultural corporations were direct causes of the fires. Jussi Parikka’s Seed, Image, Ground produced in collaboration with Abelardo Gil-Fournier is a visual investigation into the process of seed bombing and links images, seeds, aerial operations, and transformation of earth surfaces into data (Fig. 1). Soil, for instance, from being represented as surface has emerged in artistic practice and theory and criticism as an ecosystem that is alive and implicated in various entanglements, and as an active constituent of the atmosphere.  

Artistic research and new strands of interdisciplinary art history that goes beyond eco-criticism have created a space for scholarly and artistic activism for environmental justice. As the field of art history expands and broadens, can art historians critically rethink concepts that are fundamental to art history, such as time and scale, in ways that are productive for an intersectional eco-politics? Is it time to also question traditional configurations such as “culture” and “design” in a multispecies context?
Environmental Justice

Groups such as Art Not Oil, BP or not BP?, UK Tar Sands Network, Platform London, Science Unstained, Shell Out Sounds, and other groups in Norway and parts of Europe have been contesting petro-capitalist corporate power and its long-term hold over public institutions such as museums and universities (Fig. 2). In 2016, Liberate Tate and other London-based groups won a near to six-year campaign, which compelled the Tate to break off its sponsorship agreements with BP. Regardless of this victory, the relationship between museums, the art market, and petro-capitalism is far from over. Platforms such as Culture Declares Emergency include a growing community of artists, institutions, and cultural sector actors who are actively working towards finding ways to use cultural interventions in making transformational change towards the combined catastrophes of climate change, a mass extinction of vital biodiversity, and a degradation of ecosystems everywhere. If “culture” is to play a role in the communication of an ecological crisis, do we have a handle on what “culture” is and what it can be?

Figure 2.

What are the next steps? How can artists, art historians, and cultural organizations work together to think and act between theory and practice? What can we learn from other cognate fields such as anthropology, history of science, queer studies, science, and technology studies that allow us to build new methods and practices?
Response by

Jessica Horton, Associate Professor, Department of Art History, The University of Delaware

Ecocritical Art History for a Palimpsest Planet

As I read Sria Chatterjee’s far-ranging prompt for this forum, several maps flashed before my mind’s eye. There was a map created by the Anishinaabe artist Elsa Hoover for the 2016 #StandingRockSyllabus, which connects the path of the since-completed Dakota Access Pipeline for oil to successive dispossessions of Lakota, Dakota, and Nakota territory in the wake of United States Indian Removal policy; 21 a map of Africa “drooping down like a gigantic question mark” at the Berlin Conference of 1884–1885, where the male leaders of predominantly Western nation-states developed rules for the conquest and extraction of mineral-rich lands; 22 a dual visualization issued by the University College London Institute for Global Health Commission in 2009, which exaggerates nations’ landmasses on the one hand, according to carbon emissions (the United States and Western Europe are bloated) and on the other, according to the resulting health effects (now Africa and India loom large); 23 and an altered “map” of the Diné (Navajo) cosmos, a sand painting called Whirling Logs, that the haatali (singer, ceremonial healer) Fred Stevens gifted to the Horniman Museum in London in 1966 in an effort to rebalance a world riven by new extractive technologies and frontiers (Fig. 3). In my imagination, the lines on these maps crossed, merged, and bled, restoring the temporal and spatial heterogeneity, the multiple and often incompatible ways of knowing and relating to the same earth, that colonial maps evacuate.
Unlike the blue marble that galvanized hopes for universal peace and holism in 1972, this palimpsest planet is crossed by violent as well as familial relations. A global ecocritical art history adequate to its image must be a collaboration of many who are committed to an expanded intersectionality—one premised on ecological as well as sociopolitical thriving as constitutive of Black and Indigenous justice “alongside the self-determination of other communities and societies violently impacted by the white supremacist, colonial, and capitalist logs instantiated in the origins of the Anthropocene”. In its infancy, much ecocritical art history has entailed established scholars adapting new methods to familiar objects of study, from landscapes to luxury furniture. It is time to invest in the creative archive of the majority world, reorienting the discipline toward a multiplicity of earth knowledges that are as global in scope as the cosmologies driving the violent expansion of modern nation-states.

*Whirling Logs*, created during Fred Stevens’ US Department of State’s sponsored Cold War tour through Eurasian and Latin American countries, is my provocation for such an endeavor. Stevens mapped a universe of ideal, harmonious relations in the manner taught by the Diné Holy People, the original inhabitants of the earth, by sprinkling colorful pulverized sandstone brought from the Navajo Nation upon a bed of regionally mined sand provided by his hosts. He left the design incomplete to render it safe for circulation beyond Diné ceremonial contexts. He then collaborated with Horniman Museum conservators to consolidate the ephemeral work into a
durable gift. The team reinforced a wooden tray for the work with steel Handy Angle frames and bolts, then used an aerosol gun and a weedol applicator to spray layers of the substrate with Casco Extra-Bond, a polyvinyl glue of Nordic manufacture.\textsuperscript{27} *Whirling Logs* was remade as an amalgam of post-war technologies and the earth they were busy upending. It persists in the reconceived World Gallery of the Horniman Museum today, propelling a Diné cosmopolitical mandate to rebalance disordered relations into a precarious future.
Response by

Ashley Dawson, Professor of English and founder of the Climate Action Lab, The City University of New York

Mapping Fossil Capitalism

The time to help the public visualize climate chaos is over: the planet is burning, over a million people have died from a pandemic linked to human incursions into the natural world that are simultaneously fueling climate breakdown, and more than a quarter of a billion people face acute hunger as the carbon-spewing global capitalist food system collapses. The only people having trouble visualizing climate change at this point are those being paid handsomely for their blindness. If we want to shut down fossil capitalism, if we want to stop hurtling towards planetary ecocide, we have to disarticulate powerful cultural institutions from their alliances with fossil fuel corporations and offshoots such as automobile companies. And we also have to get better at shutting down fossil extraction and its political corollary, fossil fascism. The art world can help create powerful tools for this struggle.

One way for artists, cultural activists, and researchers to strike against the corporations driving climate chaos would be through a “Mapping Fossil Capitalism” project. Working collaboratively, activists, researchers, and artists could track links between fossil fuel corporations, cultural institutions, think-tanks, and political action committees, among other entities. The fossil fuel industry wants to greenwash its image by promoting itself using corporate sponsorship, but it is not happy when activists indict and publicize these oily ties. In addition to making current fossil capitalist networks visible, such a project could also map the networks of resistance, loosely known as Blockadia. Finally, the project could also map emerging examples of clean energy and energy democracy that provide an antithesis to fossil capitalism. All of this information could be disseminated through cultural institutions, further consolidating public sentiment against fossil capitalism.

There are some strong antecedents for such a mapping project. In their report on oil and gas pollution in Vaca Muerta, for example, the Forensic Architecture group explores the claims of the Indigenous Mapuche people that extraction by companies like Chevron, ExxonMobil, and Total has irreversibly damaged their ancestral homeland in what is one of the world’s largest shale deposits. Taking such forensic work into museums in order to break the ties between cultural institutions and Big Oil, Liberate Tate has executed headline-grabbing and effective actions in museums, BP or Not BP? has challenged the British Museum’s ties to Big Oil, and Platform London has
shown us how to track some of the links between banks, oil, and the arts. In the USA, the photographer Richard Misrach and the architect Kate Orff have collaborated on *Petrochemical America*, a powerful documentation of the toxic corridor of refineries and chemical industries along the lower Mississippi river.

Much of this research and activist work has tended to take the form of institutional critique and disruption, but there are also nascent possibilities to re-articulate cultural institutions in alliance with the forces fighting fossil capitalism. The photograph included here shows a gathering of activists at a ceremony on Ramapough Lenape tribal land in New Jersey (Fig. 4). The pictured totem pole, created by the House of Tears carvers of the Lummi Nation in the Pacific Northwest, had travelled across the USA, knitting together Indigenous communities and their allies in a red line of solidarity against the black snake of fossil capitalism. Bringing activist scientists, curators, and Indigenous water protectors into alliance, the Natural History Museum moved institutions like the Carnegie Museum of Natural History and the Watershed Institute to take a firm stand against fossil capitalism. Mapping and building on these solidarities will be key to the fight to reconfigure cultural institutions into solidarity in the struggle to end ecocide.

**Figure 4.**
Members of the Lummi Nation, the Ramapough Lenape Nation, Science for the People, and the Natural History Museum assemble for a totem pole blessing ceremony on Ramapough Lenape land in New Jersey prior to the opening of *Kwel’ Hoy: Many Struggles, One Front*, an exhibition co-produced by the House of Tears Carvers of the Lummi Nation and the Natural History Museum at the Watershed Institute in Pennington, New Jersey. Dedicated to the sacred obligation to draw the line against fossil fuel developments that threaten our collective future, the Lummi Nation’s Totem Pole Journey travels to sites of environmental struggle across the country to build solidarity between communities. Digital image courtesy of Michael Palma / Courtesy of the Natural History Museum, Pennington, New Jersey (all rights reserved).

Lastly, mapping renewable energy will be an important corrective to the danger of kicking off a fresh round of extractivism as the world shifts to energy systems based on renewables. While it is imperative that we transition off fossil fuels, in other words, this change may lead to forms of
green colonialism whereby minerals and other precious resources are
stripped from vulnerable regions in the Global South. Even as we
intensify—and win—the struggle against fossil capitalism, we must establish
sharp distinctions between genuinely democratic forms of renewable energy
that are part of a just transition and new forms of green colonialism and
green capitalism.
Response by

**Pablo Mukherjee**, Professor of English and Comparative Literary Studies, Warwick University

**Lines in the Sand**

Sria Chatterjee concludes her reflections on the arts and environmental justice by asking how artists, art historians, and cultural organisations can communicate the urgency of the contemporary climate crises to their audiences. She also asks what they can learn from “cognate fields such as anthropology, history of science, queer studies, science and technology studies” regarding such communications.

I am, of course, wholly sympathetic to efforts to test out and explore the proliferating modes of production and dissemination of artworks in our late capitalist world. The call for properly interdisciplinary approaches in this context is also entirely appropriate. Still, I wonder whether it might not be possible or even desirable to partially reverse the trajectory of Chatterjee’s enquiry and ask instead what the “cognate fields” of professional academia can learn from artists and their responses to climate crises and questions of environmental justice.

Theodor Adorno famously inaugurates his book *Aesthetic Theory* by declaring that: “It is self-evident that nothing concerning art is self-evident any more, not its inner life, not its relationship to the world, not even its right to exist.” Yet, it seems to me from a distance of over half a century, and in no small part because of Adorno’s own profound interventions in the debates about aesthetics, we can with some degree of confidence say that what has become “self-evident” over the *longue durée* of modernity is art’s transcendental capacity of generating critical reflections on the historical and social realities that constitute it. That should be enough to settle any doubts regarding its right to exist.

In fact, the Adornian aphorism could easily be adopted in relation to climate crises and calls for environmental justice. As scholars like David Schlosberg have pointed out, the justice movements that took shape in late 1990s North America mostly focused on the issues of the distributional equity of environmental harm and the recognition of the diverse experiences of this harm, but was often blind to its own race and class privileges. Others, such as Neera Jain, have argued that unless calls for distributional, procedural, and recognition justices are grounded in other kinds, such as epistemological, ontological, and cognitive justices, such blind spots will be impossible to remove. Nothing about environmental justice today, to misquote Adorno, is self-evident.
My suggestion here is that artwork in the radical modernist tradition—a tradition that has endured despite every effort to “globalise” it—provides an indispensable resource for the operation of environmental justice movements. I want to support this with a necessarily brief and therefore undoubtedly tendentious observation of a single image by the Brazilian photographer Sebastião Salgado from his 1989 series, *The Rajasthan Canal Works* (Fig. 4). At first glance, this is not in any obvious sense an attempt to document environmental injustice or other kinds. The undulating, mesmerising layout of the bricks seems to raise a visual echo in the pattern on the rough woollen cloth that covers the woman, as well as in the baby’s cap. But this virtuoso compositional counterpoint also invites a second glance (and a third, and a fourth...). We are suddenly aware of the interplays not only within the image, but also, for instance, between the image and its title. While the aridity of Rajasthan’s desert is captured by the bricks, the rising waves and troughs of their arrangement also recalls the aquatic promise of the canal that is being built with them. But the two human figures on the left foreground immediately raise the question of those sacrificed at the altar of this “development”. The arms of the woman cradling the child are scarred and roughened by the exhausting labour at the brick-kiln under the desert sun. Yet, they are also infinitely tender, as if promising the sleeping child, with their touch, a world where water is no longer obtained through the forced appropriation of the life and bodies of impoverished women. No environmental justice today is possible as long as the face of this woman in Salgado’s photograph remains unimaginable to us.
Response by

Shadreck Chirikure, British Academy Global Professor, School of Archaeology, University of Oxford and Professor in Archaeology, University of Cape Town

African Cosmologies and Technologies: The Case of Indigenous African Metallurgy

Western colonialism and one of its principal drivers—capitalism—were never intended to be benign endeavours. Rather, they were all about selfishness and unrestrained accumulation. Between the seventeenth and late nineteenth centuries, colonialism and capitalism introduced destructive extractivism to regions such as southern Africa. The discovery of diamonds at what became Kimberley in the 1860s brought rapacious capitalist attention to the interior of this area. This was trailed by the significant finding of vast gold deposits on the Rand in what is now Johannesburg in the 1880s. Indigenous groups were forcibly evicted from their land to make way for this resource-extraction-based capitalism and colonialism. Gold mining damaged the environment and utilised toxic chemicals. This polluted water and made mining dumps around Johannesburg’s townships in Soweto unsafe and dangerous. With no end in sight, a vicious cycle was unleashed: landscapes, hills, valleys, glades, and livelihoods were destroyed—and continue to be destroyed. This was characterised by a dualism: back home, imperial plunderers such as Cecil John Rhodes were hailed as entrepreneurs par excellence, who brought significant wealth home. What were not often told were the ecological, social, and economic crises that had been brought upon the colonies.

Often projected as “the white men’s burden”, colonialism and capitalism marginalised and ridiculed local people and their knowledge as poor and backward. And yet, most copper, iron, and gold mines worked by early colonialists in regions such as Zimbabwe, South Africa, and elsewhere were sites of Indigenous African metal production. Most famous European explorers actually followed the leads left by African miners and used local informants to identify mineral rich regions. Wrapped up in local cosmologies, Indigenous methods of mining and metalworking were sustainable, ecologically friendly, and produced output with minimal impacts to the environment (Fig. 5). Such mining techniques supplied a major component of the gold circulated in the Indian Ocean system until the 1700s. Other than gold, Indigenous techniques of mining and metallurgy also produced iron which the missionary David Livingstone found, in the late nineteenth century, to be of a better quality than that produced in Europe at the time. Indigenous technologies were banned and assaulted by missionaries and
colonial administrators while Indigenous cosmologies were attacked for being demonic and barbaric. Capitalism created relationships of dependence whereby Africans had to sell their labour for a living, while helplessly watching the destruction of their environment.

Figure 6.
Traditional iron smelting furnace used in Nyanga, north-eastern Zimbabwe, ca. late nineteenth century. Digital image courtesy of Shadreck Chirikure (all rights reserved).

Meanwhile, the owners of capital continued to accumulate, stockpiling with dire consequences for the environment and its dependent communities. Consequently, the propagandistic talk of sustainable capitalism might be an oxymoron. The big question, however, is: can we introduce Indigenous values and approaches to the environment to arrest the disaster-capitalism-induced ecological crisis? Or is Indigenous knowledge nostalgia that cannot work under the changed circumstances of the present? Trying will tell, but
Indigenous African cosmologies holistically consider the land and universe as interdependent. Taboos made the land sacred and, in the process, protected the environment and ensured sustainable exploitation of resources.

Archaeology is uniquely positioned to recover some of this knowledge. Remnants of pre-colonial technologies such as metallurgy contain within themselves partial histories of the processes they underwent. Studying them in the laboratory makes such information accessible. Furthermore, studies of sediments permits reconstructions of the impacts of pre-colonial technology on the environment. The results often show that Indigenous mining and metallurgy were neither accompanied by environmental degradation nor toxicity. We need to learn such lessons and strategically reintroduce them, through innovation, into the mainstream for sound environmental and cultural stewardship. The lessons in local cosmologies and attitudes to land, water, flora, and fauna are essential for achieving sustainability. Profit for profit’s sake is not civilisation. It is destructive. Its excesses must be resisted. They are the primary cause of the global ecological crisis of our time.
Response by

**Ayesha Hameed**, Co-Programme Leader PhD in Visual Cultures, Goldsmiths

**Black Atlantis: The Plantationocene**

*Black Atlantis: The Plantationocene* is the documentation of a live audio-visual essay, or what I call PowerPoint cinema (Fig. 7). It is part of my larger *Black Atlantis* (2014–present) project, which looks at possible afterlives of the Black Atlantic. It takes as a point of departure, Drexciya, the late twentieth-century electronic music duo from Detroit, and their creation of a sonic, fictional world. Through liner notes and track titles, Drexciya take the Black Atlantic below the water with their imaginary of an Atlantis comprising former slaves who have adapted to living underwater. This wetness brings to the table a sense of the haptic, the sensory, the bodily, and the epidermal. What below-the-water and Atlantis brings back is the bottom of the sea, the volume of the water, the materiality of the space of the ocean, and other protagonists that inhabit the sea.

View this illustration online

**Figure 7.**


*Black Atlantis* combines two conversations: afrofuturism and the Anthropocene. Its different iterations draw analogies between Mediterranean migration and transatlantic slavery: through temporal leaps into the past and future made possible through afrofuturism; in the foreclosures of futures and the co-mingling of species explored by the Anthropocene; and in the haptic quality of seascapes.

*Black Atlantis: The Plantationocene* is the third chapter of *Black Atlantis*. It asks: what is the relationship between climate change and plantation economies, and how might we begin to think of a watery plantationocene? It revolves around two islands: a former plantation in St George’s Parish in Barbados and Port of Spain in Trinidad. Visiting the heartland of one of the three stops of the triangular trade, it takes seriously Donna Haraway’s and Anna Tsing’s use of the term “plantationocene”, which connects the development of a plantation form of production to the beginning of the current geological era that we are in.

I draw on my practice as a writer and academic to make work in other media when a linear narrative cannot do justice to the account that I am trying to tell. My work describes current migration and geopolitics through temporal
shifts into history and into the “not yets” of the future. Because they bring together disparate conversations, my works are necessarily fragmented, or form montages—as lecture performances, sound works, videos, and live audio-visual essays. I incorporate my own audio, video, and writing, combined with other videos and music (which I cite as one would an academic essay), and live readings of diverse works by writers and artists like H.P. Lovecraft, Pete Seeger, Miriam Makeba, Drexciya, and Fred Moten, among others. Each project takes on a different format and, very often, a single project takes on several forms. For example, another chapter of *Black Atlantis, Retrograde Futurism* (2018), considers the weather as a character in telling the story of the journey of a migrant ship that set sail from Cape Verde to the Canary Islands that was found four months later on the coast of Barbados. It has taken the form of an essay in the catalogue for the Dutch Pavilion of the Venice Biennale of Architecture; it has been performed internationally in the form of a PowerPoint cinema; and it is also included in a video made with Hamedine Kane for Dak’Art 2018 Dakar Biennale of Contemporary African Art. In *Black Atlantis*, this practice allows me both to look at how landscapes and seascapes act as active characters in large-scale violent migrations, and to find afterlives of the Black Atlantic in contemporary illegalised migration at sea, oceanic environments, and Afrofuturistic dance floors.
Response by

**Macarena Gómez-Barris**, Founding Director of the Global South Center and Chairperson of Department of Social Science and Cultural Studies at Pratt Institute

**The Colonial Anthropocene at the Sea’s Edge**

How do we name the colonial matrix of power at the core of African diasporic and Indigenous disposessions, or the coloniality that is often unthought within current discourses of the Anthropocene? If *The Extractive Zone* (2017) focused on territories and land, then my new work orients to the sea and the colonial hauntings that take place at the sea’s edge. 41

There is both beauty and terror as we peer from the shoreline, as the film by John Akomfrah, *Vertigo Sea* (2015), reminds us (Fig. 8). Born in Ghana, in 1957, to anti-colonial activist parents, the London-based artist John Akomfrah was a key founder of the Black Audio Film Collective in 1992, which focused on Black British representation and archival footage by documenting the personal and political experiences of the Black diaspora and other immigration histories.

**Figure 8.**
John Akomfrah, Vertigo Sea, 2015, three channel video installation, screened as part of *And the Transformation Reveals*, Nuit Blanche festival, Toronto, 2016. Digital image courtesy of Linda Dawn Hammond/ Alamy Live News (all rights reserved).
Vertigo Sea enters a complex liquid geography, where the ocean is the container, a void, the space of abolition, the site of massacre, and where the history of the non-human is presented alongside the history of racialized humanity’s devaluation. The genius of this work is the use of BBC footage from the six-part series Planet Ocean with historical footage of capture—whether it be of whale hunts, or the recreation of the washing up of Black bodies on beaches from the Transatlantic slave trade. This is not about producing histories of equivalence but, instead, makes evident how the archival presence of the sea acts as a visual mediator for colonial and anthropogenic brutality.

The work is a sublime trans-temporal exploration and a visual spectacle that offers a dizzying dive into the ocean as site of history, where images from natural disasters, colonial discoveries, animal massacres, and references to the Middle Passage loop give the audience a submerged view on the terror of coloniality and its ongoing presence in modernity. In one screen, a whale appears with its young. In the prior scene, we witnessed the celebratory black and white footage of whale hunts in the Southern Ocean.

As if to emphasize the disposability of life within the extractive capitalist economic model, Akomfrah also included photographs of General Augusto Pinochet’s victims thrown into the sea, recalling Thatcher’s complicity in neoliberal dictatorships. In the next scene, a Nigerian migrant describes his terrifying experience of being left adrift in the Mediterranean, alongside a second channel of a lone polar bear floating upon a melting piece of ice. These overlapping palimpsestic images connect global experiences of authoritarianism, expulsion, migration, and extinction to the origin stories of racial and extractive capitalism.

For instance, on the soundtrack, we hear the unsettling words of a haunted past echoing forward as the words of the former slave trader turned abolitionist, Reverend John Newton are re-enacted: “Why do I speak of one child when I have heard of over a hundred men cast into the sea.” These words come from the Zong massacre of 1781, where 133 captive peoples were thrown overboard as cargo claims on insurance. Akomfrah makes present a vertiginous claim, the transactional haunt, the sea pregnant with ghostly traces, images, fragments, and echoes within the ebb and flow of the Atlantic Ocean and the Middle Passage.

This aesthetic and decolonial form of connecting across oceans and extractive histories allows us to make present the capitalist imperative of drilling that depends upon moving off the land. We are reminded that, like the ocean, these histories of somatic, earthly and liquid energy return us to the devastating and innumerable capitalist designs of dispossession.
Response by

Tao Leigh Goffe, Assistant Professor, Literary Theory and Cultural History, Cornell University

Human Resources: Art’s History and the Ecology of Black Extraction

This month, I became inducted into a club that never would have had me as a member; I became a fellow of the Linnean Society. The world’s oldest active biological society, founded in 1788 for the production of natural history by gentlemen in the metropole, for “armchair naturalists and collectors” as art historian Sria Chatterjee aptly describes them. It was established to exclude everything I represent as a Black woman. It is not lost on me that the taxonomy, invented by Swedish botanist Carl Linnaeus and adopted in Europe, is an extension of race as a colonial sorting tool of empire, as Ann Laura Stoler puts it. The taxonomy of race attempted to order and enclose that which could not be bounded, Black life.

The relationship between Black women and research is fraught because we have been the very specimens of taxidermy. I have conducted archival research for the past few years at the Linnean Society (Royal Academy) in London, where I have traced the original letters of white creole traffickers of human, animal, and plant life. The research is for a book I am writing on Afro-Asian plantation life titled After Eden. Natural history research is as much reading against the language of the archival grain as it is examining sketches, drawings, and paintings of animals and plants. The visuality of such European colonial archives is striking because it produces another fiction: the underside of the pastoral. Alongside this pictorial taxonomy of non-human life is the accounting and management of Black, Chinese, and Indian life. These pictures are not exactly art, but science, not representation, but intended as fact. The violence of the plantation order enclosed my forebears for centuries in the Antilles and tried and failed to erase Indigenous West African and Southern Chinese epistemologies.

I find myself drawn to the aesthetic of artists attuned to these ecologies and cosmologies. I point to an archipelagic aesthetic with the ethos of what the late Barbadian poet Kamau Brathwaite described as “the unity is submarine”. Michelle Stephens encourages a vertical axis for examining the archipelago, which I read as the connectivity of global tectonic plates, the geologic bedrock that connects the submarine archipelago. Primary among the artists I identify as of this archipelagic aesthetic is the Afro-Chinese Cuban painter Wifredo Lam (Fig. 9). He was not the Black Picasso, as has been repeated ad nauseam. Rather it was Picasso who extracted Blackness as a white Spaniard. The photographer Nadia Huggins, another
artist I identify of this aesthetic, gives subaquatic focus to Indian Bay in the artist’s country of birth, St Vincent and the Grenadines. The toponymy suggests the ambiguity of what is sedimented in the geography of the Caribbean (Fig. 10). Is the bay named for the misrecognition of the Amerindian for the East Indian?

Figure 9.
I propose a related orientation of analysis to the intersectional art history (following Kimberlé Crenshaw) that Sria Chatterjee suggests, a geological cross section of the ongoing climate crisis. The geological record of sedimentsed layers of bones, of biomatter, of fossil fuels reveals the uneven violence of human history. Decomposed bones of abducted Africans, murdered Indigenous peoples, and indentured Asians materially and literally compose a bedrock of disposable life, the hemisphere. I have defined this elsewhere as “racial sedimentation” in my examination of the forgotten catastrophe of racial indenture to describe the extractive, transformative, layering of race in landscape. 47

Who is being fossilized or petrified in the ongoing colonial present? The extraction of Black thought operates by the same colonial logic that led to the ecological crisis, capitalism. What are the sedimentsed layers in the cross section of art history? In the present moment of racial crisis, Black thinkers long ignored are now being drawn upon, extracted for the value of their ideas. Black intellectual capital is acknowledged and synthesized, absorbed by citational practices of extraction. Black thought has become a human resource for the humanities as Black bodies were for the sciences. Where does this situate art history and the citational poetics of representation? When critics synthesize what Sylvia Wynter, Cedric Robinson, and Ruth Wilson Gilmore have been writing for decades about racial capitalism, what sort of intellectual extractivist mining is performed? To mine Black theory
answers the simultaneous calls to #CiteBlackWomen and to perform land acknowledgements for local Native tribes. However, citation is by nature an extractive process of intellectual mining that erases even while “saying their names”. Citation produces value through appropriation as the logic of capitalist extractivism does. Ultimately, the epistemic crisis adds insult to the injury of the twinned ecocidal, genocidal project of the so-called Industrial Revolution, more aptly the ongoing European Invasion.
Lessons from the Eco-Caribbean

“One meditates here by the Thames—as one meditates there not far from the Amazon or the Orinoco—upon the fate of the earth and its species.”

Wilson Harris, the Guyanese-born writer and peripatetic intellectual, delivered these prescient words in a BBC Radio 4 broadcast, aired in 1996. I start with his musings on fluvial correspondences because they exemplify a diasporic sensibility capable of intuitively grasping the space–time dislocations of an ecological crisis of planetary proportions. Harris left British Guiana (the country became independent Guyana in 1966) for the imperial metropole at the end of the 1950s, though he continued to travel between Britain and the Caribbean thereafter. Such transoceanic circuits afforded, and continue to afford, a uniquely sophisticated perspective on the Earth’s interconnectedness and fragility. Deeply influenced by Indigenous cosmologies (particularly those of the Amerindian communities that, to this day, populate the Guyanese interior), Harris would have recognised the contemporary discourse of the Anthropocene, and the attendant rise of New Materialist philosophies within the North Atlantic humanities, as belated recognitions on behalf of Western intellectuals of the ecological flaws of an imperialist conception of history understood as human progress achieved against the background of a passive Earth.

Although he penned a mesmerising array of eco-poetic texts, inspiring the work of visionary artists ranging from Aubrey Williams to LeRoy Clarke, few scholars (Elizabeth DeLoughrey and Kobena Mercer among them) have placed Harris at the post-colonial core of the ecological critique of modernity. To this day, the humanities continue to privilege what DeLoughrey calls “white (settler) cultural production” over the environmental consciousness of Black, Creole, and Indigenous authors and activists, obscuring a rich tradition of ecocritical thinking with profound insights on the limitations of utilitarian and techno-driven conceptions of progress. Contemporary artists with diasporic affiliations in the transnational Caribbean have been ready to foreground the political and cognitive strategies forged on the racialised frontiers of capital, where the violence of climate change is most harshly felt. For while the biotic exploitation of the Caribbean occupied a central place in the formation of a universally connected market with irreversible anthropogenic effects on the planet, today, this region is disproportionately affected by a global environmental crisis whose local consequences include intensified hurricanes, prolonged droughts, unprecedented floods, dying reefs, and a staggering loss of biodiversity.
If Harris’ generation was primarily concerned with pursuing anti-colonial alternatives to the epistemological and ecological violence of imperial landscape practices, artists practising today are also tasked with giving representation to an unprecedented ecological crisis without divorcing the urgency of this catastrophe from centuries of environmental “slow violence” at the expense of the Global South. In How Flexible Can We Make the Mouth (2019), her exhibition for Dundee Contemporary Arts, the Scottish-Barbadian artist Alberta Whittle used a combination of historic and contemporary imagery to collapse the temporal and ontological distance between the Columbian exchange and the accelerated atmospheric turbulences that now beset the Antilles, and Barbados in particular (Fig. 11). The installation made an affecting case for placing the origins of the Anthropocene with the European colonisation of the Americas, critiquing the universalising geologics implicit in the nomenclature of this discourse. Crucially, the project addressed Britain as a nation founded on collective amnesia, where the historic effacement of overseas regimes of colonial as well as neo-colonial exploitation go hand in hand with the privilege of welcoming each summer heatwave with not so much as an afterthought for the catastrophic ramifications that such climatic anomalies have on a planetary scale.

Figure 11.
Roshini Kempadoo, Like Gold Dust, still from the film, 2019–ongoing. Digital image courtesy of Roshini Kempadoo (all rights reserved).
Similarly, *Like Gold Dust* (2019–ongoing) by the London-based artist Roshini Kempandoo ventriloquises and amplifies the environmental activism of Latina and Indigenous women in the Americas, drawing on the work of Kathryn Yusoff to link histories of mineral extraction with centuries of Black subjection (Fig. 12). The daughter of Guyanese parents, Kempandoo conceived this multimedia project as a fictional dialogue between two activists based respectively in Texas and Guyana, two countries connected by an unevenly shared fossil fuel economy (ExxonMobil, the Texan oil and gas corporation, effectively holds a monopoly over Guyana’s recently discovered crude reserves). *Like Gold Dust* complicates official narratives about the benefits of foreign investment in the Guyanese economy by foregrounding the perspectives of those women who are simultaneously at the forefront of protests against neocolonial extractivist ventures and at the
sharp end of their cataclysmic effects on the planet, but whose voices go largely unheeded in the West. This erasure further speaks to the universalising operations that characterise Western approaches to environmentalist thought. In stark contrast, Wilson Harris always maintained that post-colonial societies in the southern hemisphere of the world possessed the “genius to tilt the field of civilization”, so that one may reach “a different apprehension of reality”, and begin to address the future in radically inventive and progressive terms. 49 This tilting, I want to suggest, is what art historians should champion in the face of today’s crises. Indeed, the discipline has much to learn from the decentred, transhistorical, and polyvocal imagination of artists like Kempandoo and Whittle.
Response by

**Andil Gosine**, Professor of Environmental Arts and Justice, York University

"Very Mongoose"

“I feel very mongoose these days”, Kelly Sinnapah Mary says from her studio in Saint François, Guadeloupe. This year the artist has created many drawings and paintings that respond to two dominant concerns of 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic and police violence against Black people. A range of cartoonish animal and hybrid figures, such as the self-representational three-tailed mongoose wearing her elementary school shoes, appear in these works (Fig. 13). They are an expression, in part, of how feelings of distress and an awareness of her own visceral animality, including her survivalist instinct, are amplified in times of crisis. Sinnapah Mary’s imagined figure in this painting also has a basis in colonial history. The Javan mongoose was introduced to the Caribbean in the 1870s as a form of pest control for snakes and rats in sugarcane fields. The method was effective but the predators also exterminated several indigenous species in the process.
In my upcoming monograph *Nature’s Wild: Love, Sex, and Law in the Caribbean*, I write about a previous series of Sinnapah Mary’s works, which similarly trouble the line set between human and non-human life. This differentiation was foundational to colonization of the Americas, justifying the conquest of nature and, simultaneously, non-white peoples. Indigenous and enslaved peoples and indentured workers, who were brought to the western hemisphere following emancipation, were placed somewhere between the poles. They were “less human, more animal”, and therefore deserving of both the oppressive extraction of their labour, akin to the extraction of natural resources, and candidates for the civilizing hand of colonial powers. The potency of this logic is still felt 500 years after Columbus’s arrival, including through laws that govern sexuality (sodomy and bestiality are usually linked) and norms around dress (humans wear clothes, animals are naked). Beyond the Caribbean, the near-universal effort that we expend in most human societies to define ourselves as human-not-animal has the
effect of disciplining measures, which tend to be more punitive to humans who less fit defined norms of humanity. It also works against experiencing empathy for and allyship with non-human animals.

In the context of urgent environmental crises, including accelerated species extinction, artistic endeavours like Sinnapah Mary’s provide a unique service to the project of environmental justice. None of her works illustrate a specific environmental disaster, nor do they shout a fix for one or even offer an aspirational slogan. Instead, what her practice does is represent some of the complex terrain of the broad historical trajectories and processes, including our unconscious and subconscious impulses, which produce conditions of the present. Some visual artists have and will continue to work with environmentalists to design images with clearly defined messages that speak to specific issues of justice. But there is a place too—a much more interesting one, I think—for the kind of work accomplished by Sinnapah Mary’s practice. Both for herself and her audiences, she probes our location in this crisis, asking us to consider how our experiences of trauma and injury inform the understanding we have of our place in nature, and to reflect about how we might be implicated in its destruction.
The Trouble with Relationality

Any art which responds to nature, creatures, the land, or the environment must now grapple with the planetary axes described by Sria Chatterjee—the epoch’s “white geology”, as well as its creatively destructive capital flows that remake landscapes and mould human psyches. We live in times in which relationality seems to be the name of the game at all scales: from biogeo planetary processes, to the warp and weft of deep time as it emerges in the present, to knots of creatures implicated in mutual becoming and living.

Artistic responses, as Sria Chatterjee notes, increasingly embody an activist sensibility, a thirst for eco-justice, and a desire to repair past violence. The ethical and political impulse here is twofold. First, to witness creatively anthropocenic relationality and so dent collective myths of invulnerability and mastery. Second, to weave new relations of care for progressive ends. Anthropocenic art is based upon a wager on relationality.

I suggest, however, that relationality is more uncertain ground than it seems for anthropocenic art and environmental justice. The initial and most obvious reason is that the ontological reality of being-in-relation does not map on to a given set of ethico-political outcomes. Beings can be brought into relation through noticing/care/love as well as through exploitation/violence/death—and often through both vectors at once. Relationality is fertile ground for projects of settler-capitalist exploitation, as well as progressive projects of care.

Multispecies relationality is tricky—we may care, but our non-human others usually do not. Who makes planetary life possible? The green ones, our photosynthesising companions; those who transmute the sun’s energies into the stuff of life and have done so for two billion years. Yet, they remain profoundly indifferent to us. We may be brought together on our plates, in the forest, in the palm oil plantation, but the plant remains profoundly other and uncaring. There is a relationality here, but it cannot cross easily into generalised multispecies ethic of care. While most obvious when looking at plants, all creatures are subtended by this one-way “relation to an unreadable other”, as Clare Colebrook puts it. Alterity and distance are the necessary supplement for life and relation.
This asymmetry works on other scales, too. The processes of geology and atmosphere are not, despite the fantasies of the geo-engineers, manageable. As the geographer Nigel Clark continues to argue, the earth persists through abyssal forces that cannot be cared for, only endured.  

Art should be well placed to face these asymmetries. An anthropocenic art ethic might tack less towards composing new relations of care and more towards evoking the ineffable, the alien, and the un-governable parts of planetary. Not through communicating, meaning-making, or activism within the contours of “the actual”, but also by opening our senses to a larger set of realities.
Response by

Sonny Assu, Artist

LAND BACK! Digital Posters as an Archive of the Movement

Before the 'Rona. Before the "murder hornets." Before the murders of Black, Indigenous People of Colour (BIPOC). Before incompetent and privileged white men stole power from the people (actually, that’s been going on since time immemorial). Basically, before 2020 became a complete and utter dumpster fire, Indigenous youth across what is now known as Canada stepped up to protect the Land and Water against a natural gas pipeline expansion that would cut across the traditional territory of the Wet’suwet’en.

In an era of United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), quote-unquote-reconciliation and Canada’s PM stating there is nothing more important than the relationship between the settler state and Indigenous peoples, this pipeline was a slap in the face—not only to Indigenous people but the environment we all take for granted.

In January, the government decided it was time to get the Coastal GasLink project underway. Proposed a decade earlier, this pipeline would carry natural gas from north-eastern British Columbia (BC) through unceded Wet’suwet’en territory (in the north-western, central interior of the province) to the fragile coastal waters near Kitimat to be liquefied and shipped to markets in Asia. Although approved by the twenty First Nation band councils (imposed through the Indian Act) along the route, the hereditary leadership of the Wet’suwet’en people stood in defence of the environment. The Wet’suwet’en believe it is their hereditary duty to defend the environment for the benefit of all. The hereditary leadership issued a call to action, and Indigenous people across the country came together in a beautiful way. Warmed by the sacred fires, they said “NO” to the powers that be. They continue to say no because the Land was never ceded, sold, or transferred. They erected blockades to keep heavy equipment from pouring in, and they issued an order that the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) must leave their territory. Activists flocked to the frontlines to add their support. Drums, songs, dances, and traditional language blended with the smoke of the sacred fires to let the ancestors know their ultimate goal: Land Back!

Indigenous people and their allies, from every walk of life, held rallies and demonstrations across the country. Shutting down vital intersections, railways, ports, and occupied government buildings. Beyond Land Back, they demanded respect and they wanted to hold the governments accountable for their actions and inactions. But most importantly, they wanted the powers that be to listen to the original people of the Land. As the weeks rolled by,
tensions between Indigenous folk and settlers grew. The benign image of the tolerant and just Canadian has worn thin on the international stage as the colonial state’s systematic racism has started to shine through. It was the dead of winter in BC’s snow-encrusted Northern region, and the Land defenders on the front lines were beginning to face-off against Canada’s national police force. Heavily armed RCMP officers were sent in to clear the way for the pipeline work.

As an artist, I like to use my platform to elevate conversations. As an Indigenous person, I feel it is my duty to protect the Land and the Water, to preserve it for our future ancestors. And this is where my two realities meet. Not all my work is political … but there are traces of politics in everything I make. Now, these pieces—designed as posters—are overtly political (Figs 14–16). They slap you in the face a bit with it, frankly. They are a call to action, and an archive of the movement.
Figure 14.
Sonny Assu, Land Back, 2020, digital image, 24.5 x 36.5 in. Originally produced for CONVERSATIONS Langue et Propagande / Language and Propaganda (The Publishing Eye, 2020). Digital image courtesy of Sonny Assu (all rights reserved).
Figure 15.
Sonny Assu, This is Reconciliation, 2020, digital image, 24.5 x 36.5 in. Originally produced for CONVERSATIONS Langue et Propagande / Language and Propaganda (The Publishing Eye, 2020). Digital image courtesy of Sonny Assu (all rights reserved).
As we reflect on this dumpster fire of a year, COVID-19, murder hornets and climate change: we can look back to the settler-colonizer ancestors and lay the blame directly at their feet.

I’ve been immensely impressed by the current generation of Indigenous Land/Water defenders. Some, having been raised on the frontlines, are co-leading this current movement. They have stood up to recognize the farce of reconciliation (some say it’s dead, I ask if it was ever alive) and have demanded Land Back because they carry themselves, as they know their ancestors are watching.
Response by

**Douglas Kahn**, Professor Emeritus at University of California at Davis and University of New South Wales, Sydney

**Generating**

The best-known golden spike was never meant to stay where it was. Leland Stanford drove it into the ground to ceremoniously tie together the First Transcontinental Railroad: “May God continue the unity of our Country, as this Railroad unites the two great Oceans of the world” (Fig. 17). With its inscription and silver hammer scratches, it is now on view at the Cantor Arts Center at his university, one of those treasures that, according to Walter Benjamin, documents barbarism that one “cannot contemplate without horror”. When the golden spike travels on loan, an official replica takes its place—both put Native American genocide on display.

![Golden Spike Image](image-url)

**Figure 17.**
William T. Garrett Foundry, The Last Spike (The Golden Spike), 1869, gold, alloyed with copper, 1.11 x 14.13 x 1.27 cm. Collection Cantor Arts Center, Stanford University (1998.115). Digital image courtesy of Cantor Arts Center, Stanford University, Gift of David Hewes (all rights reserved).

The golden spikes of the Global Stratotype Section and Point variety were virtually unknown outside stratigraphy prior to the Anthropocene discourse boom. Their value lies in remaining where they are, implanted in geological strata as an emblematic marker corresponding to a particular passage of time at all points on earth. To establish a GSSP for the Anthropocene, stratigraphers contemplated the genocide of 50 million Indigenous Americans and the isotopic signature deposited by rehearsals for global
nuclear annihilation. Deracinating mass death to create a tool betrays a note of optimism: geologists showed care far off into the future for their professional progeny, whether they will exist or not. Those preferring to read histories in ice cores are less sanguine.

That geology became a touchstone discourse in the epoch of climate catastrophe was bizarre given its dominant professional focus. Awkwardly announcing that 2019 would be the Year of Carbon, the British Geological Society stated that: “Carbon-based energy resources […] remain of critical importance as both a source of energy but also in planning for a future carbon-neutral society”, filtering emissions from its journal *Petroleum Geoscience*. It was irksome to see geologists who trained extractors, if not worked directly in the industries themselves, schooling arts and humanities events over the last decade.

Universities need to extract themselves from these fruits of the profession, not just financially. That Yale, the university associated with this journal, is still defending its fossil fuelled portfolio as recently as February 2020 should be contemplated with horror. Geologists fantasize about providing future generations of geologists with tools of deracinated death, but Yale has decided to amortize (OED: stem *amortir*, to die, become lifeless, to kill, destroy…) their progeny, although contributing to global heating is certainly one way to decrease legacy admissions.

When too fixed towards the past, art history—unlike climate modelling—can be rendered inept among the latencies between actions and their consequences, surrendering an ethics of intergenerational care and justice. Setting aside how the discipline might tie time together, here is one artistic moment at the Edinburgh Festival during the mid-1980s. A young Polly Higgins sees the work of the artist, architect, and environmentalist Hundertwasser and: “He really inspired me … and as a result I ended up spending time with him in Vienna and learning an awful lot about the European ecology movement”. Higgins would become a barrister and the driving force in attempts to get *ecocide* recognized internationally on a par with war crimes and genocide. The recent development of climate attribution studies means that corporate, state, and individual actors can now be better identified in civil suits for what they hide in latency, in time, and for the crime of ecocide, should it be officially recognized. The question is whether enough time is left for the law.
Response by

Andrea Gaynor, Associate Professor of History, The University of Western Australia

The Making of Collins Street

Art—not least British settler colonial art—has proven a fertile field for the practice of environmental history. Topographical and landscape artists, in particular, included a wealth of ecological and climate information in their works, which—even accounting for stylistic distortions—yield valuable information about past environments, as well as environmental perception. For example, Bill Gammage used colonial artworks as compelling evidence for particular forms of Aboriginal land management in The Biggest Estate on Earth (2012). Ian McLean and I also created a database of art from the Swan River region of Western Australia that showed how artworks collectively over time depicted fewer trees of large girth, and less local flora, over the period from 1827 to 1950. 59

This is useful work, but the time has come for environmental historians to move beyond art that makes “landscape”, “nature”, or “the environment”—intentionally or otherwise—a principal subject. In a planetary system, environment is omnipresent; the question is therefore not whether an artwork has environmental content, but rather the form and degree of transformation of the non-human world that is depicted: the less “nature” we see, the more it has been transformed, and the more we should wonder about how it came to be that way. 60
Take, for example, John Brack’s *Collins St, 5pm*, which was voted the most popular painting in the National Gallery of Victoria in 2011 (Fig. 18). Conventionally understood as a depiction of the monotony and alienation of post-war urban life, it might instead be taken as a measure of the settler capitalist project in Australia. The work does not even hint at the stolen land, the massacres, the sheep with jack-hammer hooves, the bush rolled and burnt, the gaping dusty mines, but all of these are the repressed extractivist foundations on which Collins Street was built, enabling the growth of settler populations, and the accumulation of settler wealth. Much of that wealth was deposited with and insured by the institutions that made Collins Street the financial heart of “Marvellous Melbourne”, a major settler-colonial city. Yet, as is so often the case, the threads that connect exploitation and beneficiaries are invisible: all we can see in Collins Street are substantial buildings and well-dressed white people—the opaque material traces of the processes that generate wealth and direct it to some ends and not others. Is it an accident that the only business identified in the painting is the Bank of New South Wales, a crucial institution in the colonial transition from a penal to a capitalist economy? Brack’s use of repetition and colour encourage us to think between poles of individuality and uniformity, but there is a much bigger story here, and there is a role for environmental historians in telling it.
We non-Indigenous people need more resistant environmental historical readings of artworks that appear to have little to do with “environment”, as meditations on how our social preoccupations and aesthetic inclinations have worked to decentre and mystify our intimate relationship with and dependence upon the living earth.
Response by

**Amanda Boetzkes**, Professor of Contemporary Art History and Theory, University of Guelph

**Time for Political Ecology**

Sria Chatterjee’s provocation poses trenchant questions about how to take hold of the emerging discourses of ecological crisis to renew art history and criticism. The fundamental terms of history and representation are indeed at stake as we struggle to surface the catastrophic effects of colonialism, slavery, capitalism, and resource extraction while insisting on resistance, responsibility, and justice through art.

Futurity hangs in the balance. The discourse of the Anthropocene is accompanied by a self-actualizing form of fatalism that forecloses the possibility of future life while erasing complex histories. It therefore appears to be subtended by a conviction not only that humans have engaged planetary life in an accelerated descent into a state of entropy, but also that the species is unable to reverse that trajectory. However, critics of the Anthropocene discourse suggest that the surrender to entropy reifies its destructive effects on the relationships between Indigenous people, land, and non-human animals. As the Potowotami philosopher Kyle Whyte posits, the dystopian imaginary that sees the climate crisis as a new emergency—taking the form of a sudden awakening to ecological catastrophe and the precarity of Indigenous territories and peoples—denies any understanding of the political disputes over Indigenous land that have been ongoing for centuries and that are still not resolved. Indeed, some of these disputes are gaining momentum, like the Wet’suwet’en protest against the proposed Coastal Gaslink Pipeline that would cross nearly 700km of Indigenous territory. By contrast to this present reality, the apocalypticism that underpins a settler understanding of the Anthropocene uses fatalism to preface contemporary political ecologies on the assumption that Indigenous peoples are endangered or have disappeared. Settler apocalypticism replicates the desires of colonial ancestors by pre-emptively nullifying the contemporaneity of Indigenous political struggles.
We can consider how art intervenes on the violence of entropy by representing history through non-entropic temporal modalities. Take, for example, the film *One Day in the Life of Noah Piugattuk* (2019; dir. Zacharias Kunuk) produced by the Inuit art collective Isuma and which featured in the Canadian pavilion at the 2019 Venice Biennale (Fig. 19). The film is a scene of encounter between an Inuit hunter, Noah Piuggatuk, and a character named Boss, a white man sent from the Canadian government to order Piuggatuk and his kin to move to a settlement and send the children to a government school.

Kunuk’s films might strike the settler viewer as slow, reflective, and replete with a sensibility for the elements. Likewise here, the encounter takes place over a protracted period of time sitting outside in a bright Arctic desert. The slow pacing activates the film’s political force. Little happens except a highly controlled conversation in which Boss’s agenda—the takeover of land—is held back from explicit articulation. Yet, this agenda is implicit in every word exchanged between the two. The film dilates an interaction in which Boss tries repeatedly—through everything from enticements like jam and sugar, to mild threats, to outright coercion—to weaken Noah Piuggatuk’s position on the matter of resettlement. For Piuggatuk, the visit from Boss is an exercise in saying “no” to the resettlement, whether obtusely, exegetically, rhetorically, or directly. He never recants his decision. While the Inuit were ultimately forced out to resettle, the violence of this history underwrites the film but does not act on it to exert a repetition of the colonial logic. By
decelerating entropy, the film unlocks a history of Inuit resistance to that
colonial force in and through the counterforce of endurance. Isuma thus
deploys an aesthetic orientation towards time and history in such a way as to
assert its claim over the complex political ecology still unfolding in *Inuit
Nunangat*, the land and ice of the Inuit in Canada.
Response by

**Julia Lum**, Assistant Professor, Art History, Scripps College

**Gabrielle Moser**, Assistant Professor, Aesthetics and Art Education, York University

**The Invisible and Inalienable Wind**

Sria Chatterjee’s essay ends with an urgent call for art historians to “critically rethink concepts that are fundamental to art history, such as time and scale, in ways that are productive for an intersectional eco-politics”—a call that requires stretching our thinking about the time-frame of climate change to include the world-altering effects of colonialism on the present, and to re-imagine the scale of its impact on the environment. In this way, Chatterjee echoes and amplifies the important work done by Indigenous, Black, and diasporic scholars in critiquing the discourse of the Anthropocene, particularly Heather Davis and Zoë Todd’s insistence that we date the start of climate change in the early seventeenth century with the profound transformation of the Americas through modern colonialism: the beginning of the plantation slavery system, and the attendant terraforming of the land through deforestation, extraction, and the relocation of millions of humans, plants, and animals. 63

Resetting the start date of the Anthropocene asks us to imagine how air, water, the subterranean, and its many non-human inhabitants have survived and lived beyond anthropogenic colonialism’s world-ending effects. As Macarena Gómez-Barris argues, Western landscape tradition and Eurocentric visual theories have tended to “ignore the weight of colonial seeing, neglecting its earlier forms of power”, which we, in turn, risk reifying as the sum of their extractive powers. 64 How, as art historians interested in the political investments that drive the ways the land is imagined and depicted in the (former) British Empire, can we insist on seeing the verticality of colonial violence and its “material consequences ... that affect bodies and land”, as Davis and Todd argue? 65

One possible answer lies in the work of the wind. In 1806, the British admiral Sir Francis Beaufort created a thirteen-level index that visualized the effects of wind which, in turn, helped accelerate maritime travel, colonization, and global capitalism. Over these last months, we have become all the more aware of air as something invisible but material, a precious but dangerous conduit that heeds no borders. A contrast to the visible “plague winds” of
industrializing Britain, COVID-19 poses an imperceptible threat to the air-as-commons; the bodies of Black and Indigenous peoples are as susceptible as ever.

Secwépemc and settler artist Tania Willard’s artwork *Liberation of the Chinook Wind* (2018) responds to attempts to measure the wind’s effects. But instead of registering linear thresholds, Willard’s installation records its entanglements—with histories of language and species migration. As part of *The Work of Wind*, a massive outdoor exhibition in Mississauga, Ontario that took the Beaufort scale as its framing logic, Willard installed four windsocks emblazoned with the words “CLAIM”, “WATER”, “THRASH”, and “FIGHT” along the shores of Lake Ontario (Figs 20 and 21). As the socks filled with the winds, computer software translated the weather data into poetry, using language drawn from recent government reports on fishery management in the Great Lakes ecosystem, the University of Toronto Mississauga’s official territorial acknowledgement, Indigenous land and water claims for the region, and anthropologist James Teit’s ethnographic study of the Coast Salish peoples from 1909 (Fig. 22).

**Figure 20.**
Figure 21.
Much like the poems generated by the installation—which mix the imperative tones of state interests in “increasing production” with Indigenous claims to access, stewardship, and concerns about contamination—the project integrates histories of cultural contact and interspecies conflict. Willard’s title references the introduction of Pacific Chinook salmon into Central Canadian waters in the 1960s as a way to control invasive species and as a catalyst for sport fishing; Chinook were, in turn, introduced to the rest of the Great Lakes through transatlantic trade. Evoking this migration, as well as the development of Chinook jargon as a hybridized trade language in the Northwest Coast of North America, *Liberation of the Chinook Wind* looks to the invisible and inalienable power of the wind to challenge the ways that Indigenous “bodies and lands are always disappearing in the ‘floodwaters of colonization’”, as Willard describes it. By creating a linguistic hybridization
of its own—poetic meaning that has detached itself from the syntactical coherence of its English language sources—Willard’s project invites viewers to understand landscape as animated by and through relationality.

While *Liberation of the Chinook Wind* harnesses air’s authorship, the project equally plumbs the lakeshore’s depths, inviting viewers to imagine the ways that settler colonial violence extends into and below the water line. As Todd has argued, “water can be polluted in other ways—polluted with memories of colonial events, littered with shipwrecks and other materials that we have yet to know the long-term social or spiritual or physical impacts or implications of”. The poetic refrain “legacy contaminants”, auto-generated by Willard’s wind socks, cascades into stratified layers throughout the poem upon output, much like the depths of such chemicals that linger in soils and other ecosystems long after industrial production has ceased. Willard’s project highlights such devastating long-term consequences while also suggesting chance interactions outside of anthropogenic determination, and in so doing creates landscapes as products of intentional and unintentional design.

These bodies—of fish and human, of wind gusts and shipwrecks—are not invisible in the history of British art, but require a different attunement to be read for their implication in the colonial origins of climate change. Thinking alongside Chatterjee, Todd, Willard, and Gómez-Barris, how might art historians imagine the landscape from the submerged perspective of the fish, whose experience of the times and spaces of climate change are necessarily embedded in the longer, intersectional history of colonialism?
Response by

Jennifer Mae Hamilton, Lecturer in Literary Studies, University of New England

Weathering Then, Now, and Always

What I appreciate most about James Barry’s painting is this: no one else is affected by the weather, only Lear (Fig. 23). His hair is blown horizontal. The title of the image is King Lear Weeping Over the Dead Body of Cordelia. As with the conventions of romanticist painting, Barry has playfully turned emotion into gesture. On top of this, the mythical and religious aspects of this image have been neatly documented, but rarely is the material impossibility of the strangely targeted wind in the old King’s white locks noted as contributing to the mythic significance of the tableau. What happens when this aspect of the painting is centred in our attention, not as a simple romanticist trope but as a strange conjuring of the weather for poetic ends?

Figure 23.
James Barry, King Lear Weeping Over the Dead Body of Cordelia, 1786-8, oil on canvas, 269.2 x 367 cm. Collection of Tate (T00556). Digital image courtesy of Tate (CC-BY-NC-ND 3.0).

Lear is “weathering” the situation. Weathering is “a particular way of understanding how bodies, places and the weather are all inter-implicated in our climate changing world”, but also, anachronistically, it can be a way of
thinking about the connection between these things across time in a stable climate. Lear’s individual emotions, his sense of social obligation, the literal atmospheric conditions, the ideological paradigm all combine to produce the meaning of the wind in his hair. He is very upset and we are all supposed to know it and recognise it. But, as Astrida Neimanis and Rachael Loewen Walker remind us: “we are always weathering”. In the context of Barry’s painting, everyone is also weathering, not just Lear. They are all weathering the uneven fallout from Lear’s bad decisions. Lear may be very windswept by all this, but keep in mind it is Cordelia that is dead. We are always weathering, but as Neimanis and I elaborate in a later piece, we are always weathering but not always in the same way. Exploring the similarities (we are always weathering) and differences (but not in the same way) between bodies in the world today is an urgent task for a time of ecological crisis where both the power and finitude of the earth-bound human is commanding our attention in new and alarming ways. It can be a question we ask of historical images (how were they weathering then?), but it can also be a question we explore in contemporary art praxis (how are we weathering now?).

In a very different time and place, and working under a different set of aesthetic instructions, the art-academic group “The Weathering Collective” created the “The Weathering Map of Microclimates and Approximate Watery Bodies” (Fig. 24). This initially hand-drawn and then digitised representation of local microclimates examined the specific localised weatherings of the group. The microclimates were a stunning temperature shift when one ascends a hill from a river flat, a beach with a new baby, a basement in Belgium, moisture seeping unwanted into a house due to shoddy construction, and the particular shade of a specific tree. The group sought to observe differences across the shared experience of the weather by identifying things that shape the weather for us. The weathering differently but simultaneously was imagined and represented together in a single map, with the aim of turning a theoretical concept into a series of embodied and material questions that reflected upon in situ then represented for a spectator. We were motivated to visualise these microclimates because they fall outside the dominant way in which the weather is measured. For all the known variation captured by meteorologists, the weather report ascribes a single temperature for an entire region as if such differences did not exist. Our map resisted that particular institutional narrative and told another story.
What kind of art and what kind of art history do we need most at this time? The question of the relevance of analysing a romantic painting versus my text/drawing/digital mapping collaboration interests me in this moment of global ecological, medical, and economic crisis. Barry’s image certainly cannot, in itself, be innovative. It is an old scene painting and the conclusion to Shakespeare’s tragedy of *King Lear*. In Shakespeare’s literary narrative, this scene represents the denouement of a tragedy where an old man does a shockingly bad job at giving up power. As such, it is stunningly relevant to the present moment, just before Donald Trump (presumably) cedes power, as he is more concerned with his own image than the carnage before him. The image is a cautionary tale about such power, hierarchy, and consequence. Looking at it today suggests that we have not heeded its warning. The point about relevance here then is that critical history will never “run out of steam”. But although it is important to continue with critical historical analysis, it should not be all that we do: we need to destroy and create.

How best to do that? Claire Bishop, in *Artificial Hells*, thought that participatory art—the kind of art that really aimed for social transformation—was the worst kind of art. While Bishop’s text is ultimately too cynical about participatory art, too *critical* to be entirely useful, at the same time, I find one of her most provocative claims worth a bit more thought: “at a certain point art has to hand over to other institutions if social change is to be achieved: it is not enough to keep producing activist *art*”. “The Weathering Collective” is not a group of consistently practising activist...
artists, nor are we especially participatory, but we do realise that historical investigation and critical research of any kind is not enough. Practice, creation, and new modes of participation are required. We are researchers of environmental crisis and if the environmental crisis is a material problem, it matters what we do and how we do it. We need to be changing our work practices and the world towards which we are working. After all, this crisis was built, not conjured. Thus, the only way out is a different kind of building.

If artists, however, cannot be artists and give over too much to “other institutions”, the destruction of the dominant order that is central in the creation of good art will be lost as well. Art and art history can do anything, and can do it by any means necessary, as long as it is making those most sheltered slightly more exposed and those most exposed quite a lot more sheltered.
Response by

**Kate Flint**, Provost Professor of Art History and English, University of Southern California

**The Resilience of the Dandelion**

Sria Chatterjee asks that we understand the ecological crisis as an intersectional one: one that acknowledges the interplay not just of different disciplines and approaches in our critical analysis but also of past, present, and future, and of vastly different physical and temporal scales. Such an emphasis on entanglements is, as she acknowledges, hardly new. The pioneering American ecologist George Perkins Marsh concludes *Man and Nature* (1864) with a paragraph titled “Nothing Small in Nature”. His argument throughout is that all natural phenomena are inter-related—that one shouldn’t discount the part that even the most insignificant appearing species play in the functioning of the whole, and that human disruption of even the smallest part of the natural world can have far-reaching consequences. “[I]n the vocabulary of nature, little and great are terms of comparison only; she knows no trifles.”

Marsh’s principles are, by now, a cornerstone of ecological thinking. They have their influential English counterpart in John Ruskin’s statement that “small things and great are alike part of one mighty whole”—a comment underpinning not just his own criticism and drawing, but also that of his many artistic followers who obeyed his imperative to observe nature closely. Belief in the value of even the most apparently unimportant element in the natural world received repeated theological support, not least from the many clergy contributing to the dissemination of Victorian natural history. But what might we gain from considering the “small” and easily overlooked when scrutinising nineteenth-century art?

Take the dandelion: not only a commonplace plant but also a persistent, if unremarked upon, presence in paintings. On both sides of the Atlantic, its yellow flowers and fluffy seed-heads appeared: in nursery rhyme illustrations and on decorative tiles; and in nostalgia-filled depictions of children playing in meadows or of pretty young girls blowing on Henry Thoreau’s “complete globe, a system in itself” to ascertain the affection of their lover. The hidden history of the dandelion is embedded in such images: the wayward seeds disseminating through the air in a way that ensures its global ubiquity; the plant’s changing status from rural staple, its leaves used in salads and diuretic teas, to tenacious weed, attacked through herbicides that reduce biodiversity.
The contemporary environmental artist Edward Chell considers taxonomic borderlands through depicting the wildflowers found in liminal places—motorway verges and medians (Fig. 25). He explores an environment choking with pollutants. His silhouetting technique borrows from the late eighteenth century, retaining the fragile shapes of roadside plants: hairy bittercress, creeping buttercup, and, of course, the dandelion. Although beautiful, these are toxic records: Chell mixes ink with the residue of the internal combustion engine taken from the place where he picked each flower: unburned hydrocarbons, carbon monoxide, nitrogen oxides, and particulate matter. These weedy sites mock the Victorian visual tradition of pastoral meadows; they are micro-habitats at once degraded, and yet sustaining diverse, persistent vegetation.

**Figure 25.**
Edward Chell, Dandelion Taraxacum officinale: Road Dust M4, 2011, road dust on 400gsm acid free watercolour/drawing paper, 135 x 105 cm. Digital image courtesy of Edward Chell / Photo: kind permission of Peter Abrahams – Lucid Plane.
In *The Sky of Our Manufacture*, one of the most important recent studies of the relationship between culture and anthropogenic climate change, the literary critic Jesse Oak Taylor describes the “challenge to the environmental imagination ... to render visibly present these often invisible, distributed catastrophes, a challenge that inverts the common ecocritical desire to engage in an unmediated relation to the natural world”. Our challenge as art historians is to understand the environmental change that is latent within the art of earlier periods. In this context, Chell’s art is a critical provocation, borrowing from the past to help us think through the urgency of our present moment. It prompts us to look back to all those overlooked dandelions—and other wild flowers of meadow and wayside—in Victorian paintings. In their future lie attacks from herbicides, from pollution—including the by-products of the petroleum industry—and the decimation of biodiversity at the hands of corporate agriculture. Latent within these images is the long process and global reach of environmental violence: we can no longer conscientiously think of them as idealised relics of a more rural past.
Response by

Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert, Professor of Hispanic Studies on the Randolph Distinguished Professor Chair, Vassar College

Peter Doig’s Threatened Ecotone

Grande Riviere, Trinidad, as the vultures—the corbeaux—await (Fig. 26).

Figure 26.
Peter Doig, Grand Riviere, 2001-2002, oil on canvas, 228.8 x 358.4 cm. Collection National Gallery of Canada (41147). Digital image courtesy of Peter Doig/Victoria Miro Gallery (all rights reserved).

Writing about this painting—Doig’s first Trinidadian canvas—in their book Morning, Paramin (2016), Derek Walcott evokes Conradian scenes, emptiness, and absences, as “the ‘green’ forest drips to devour the explorer”. Eerie and spectral, Doig’s landscape speaks of history—of the history of the Big River ecotone as well as the history of the colonization of the American tropics, of how a place as remote and beautiful as the mouth of the river that gives its name to the village of Grande Riviere has retained its ominous enchantment as the next catastrophe lies in wait.

Grande Riviere captures what is perhaps Trinidad’s most unspoiled ecotone, a term used in ecology to describe an abrupt transition space between adjacent community types—river, sea, forest—forming a narrow ecological zone between them defined primarily by its dynamism, by patterns, and interactions between communities that have led to radical transformations in ecological conditions led by abrupt changes in human societies. The landscape, dreamlike—nightmarish—captures the three distinct zones that
mark the ecotone: the dark, menacing, and attacking sea; the grand river that invited explorers into the island’s forested interior; and the narrow strip of beach where a forlorn horse (a colonial invasive species) is watched by a committee of Trinidad’s ubiquitous black vultures, potential “erasers” of a history of colonial presence. Their stance of eager anticipation and too close proximity to the horse wryly reminds us of why their gathering as a “committee” can quickly become a “wake” of vultures.

Grand Riviere’s power lies in its layering of histories, but also on what it tells us about possible futures. Its geographical specificity—it is a landscape that can be visited, experienced first-hand—evokes a history of extraction and exploitation of the land as a site of famous but abandoned cacao plantations, now reforested and home to growing biodiversity. Its forest represents a victory against colonial deforestation, as nature re-imposes itself over the debris of colonization. Its sands are now famous as vital nesting spaces for endangered leatherback turtles; and turtle conservation, ecotourism, and artisanal fishing have replaced exploitative practices brought by colonization in its wake. The painting echoes these developments in the solitary river tour-boat placidly resting on river waters.

Grand Riviere’s lasting impact, however, is as a reminder of the threat facing vulnerable ecotones like that formed at the place where the Big River, the sea, and the vulnerable shores of the village of Grande Riviere meet. It lies on that dark mirror-like surface that stands for the encroaching sea and its ultimate ability to erase, to obliterate the vulnerable narrow shore of Doig’s lovingly moonlit painting. The dark space capturing the reflections of the stars, catching the moonlight as it bounces against the trees and the bending palms, speaks to me of the threat posed by sea-level rise as the final layer of erasure threatening the American tropics to which Trinidad belongs. Walcott—whose love for Trinidad Doig shares—writes of there being “some vague horror inside the unchristened bush”: Doig acknowledges the horrors of the dark and foreboding bush but points to the sea and other terrors rising from below. 88
Response by

**Simon Schaffer**, Professor of History of Science, University of Cambridge

**Nature as Other, Others as Natural**

Sria Chatterjee makes the persuasive and significant argument that the contemporary ecological crisis puts questions of representation at the centre of discussions about the relationship between nature and culture. She urges us to recognise the reorganisation of the work of representation, to make evident otherwise unremarked historical pathways, whose denial presents pressing challenges for criticism and effective action in the present. A telling phrase here is the claim that “the representation of nature as other is a Euro-American construct”. Within scientific disciplines and methods produced in that setting, companion claims about the representation of others as somehow natural—allegedly devoid of complex social life or even recognisable histories—have been at least as vicious and important.

The advent of a carbonised economy in the wake of the development of the stationary steam engine and its adoption across key industrial sectors of expansive capitalism has been proposed as the decisive moment when human action first became a planetary force of geological scale. That conjuncture was also when the modern order of the natural sciences began to be established, and when a polemical claim was powerfully urged by European intelligentsia keen to discriminate between bearers of culture and occupants of what was taken to be a pre-modern natural world. They argued that the exotic and the ancient must be identified with each other—it was as though Europe’s ancestral past could be visited, surveyed, mastered, and expropriated through curious and aggressive travel to other regions of the planet. The work of making images of those regions played an indispensable role in the forging of this militant notion of history and genealogy, of nature and alterity. It still does.

One of the more significant formulations of the principle was constructed in 1800 as a brief written by the lawyer and philosopher Joseph-Marie Degérando for a planned French naval expedition to the South Pacific and Australasia, launched in direct competition with British projects to exert control over the southern continent. He argued the expedition would be voyaging into French society’s own past, to the primitive roots of the process of human development that had reached its culmination in the contemporary republic. He compared this project with the French invasion of Egypt, launched eighteen months earlier.
In the years around 1800, peoples and cultures such as those of Egypt or Australasia, under ferocious attack and exploitation, served European observers as means to determine those same observers’ status. Indigenous peoples were understood as natural types, to be contrasted with, and often treated with contempt by, scientific scrutiny. Both among Egyptian fellahin and among Tasmanian Aborigines, surveyors subjected those they encountered to precise tests of capacity for labour, with the aim of imposing an allegedly universal scale of value on what they understood as natural peoples. In Tasmania, an engineering device designed to measure the force exerted in disciplined tasks, the dynamometer, was used to compare performances by Indigenous subjects and by Europeans: the results, so it was claimed, indicated a natural association between civilisation and strength, primitivism and weakness (Fig. 27). Exterminism and exploitation were underwritten by systems of surveillance—and they were met with continuing resistance and cultural affirmation. It is telling that among the principal proponents of this naturalising doctrine of the remote as primitive were also enthusiasts for the adoption of steam engineering in industrial production, Degérando among them. Connexions between the development of fossil capitalism and of European racialist sciences matter. These forms of capital production and resource extraction became at this moment both a motive for imperial aggression and a key weapon in the struggle. They help to make better sense of representational practices of naturalists and cartographers, missionaries and surveyors, who took part in such enterprises.
There is thus a need to overhaul accounts of representation, polemics about the iconography of peoples and worlds Europeans found alien, that have often governed the exposition of visual and material culture made in these encounters and struggles. Such images and charts should not be treated as effortlessly hegemonic nor uncontested marks of authority, but rather must be understood through potent counter-signs of Indigenous agency. They can help reposition stories of climates in conflict and transformation. During the decades around 1800, the notion of climate changed its sense in most European languages. Until then, it had meant a geographical zone defined by latitude. European philosophers and geographers, naturalists, and physicians debated whether the character of a region’s inhabitants were governed by their climate, that is, determined by their geographical position. But from then on, climate came to mean a set of dynamic atmospheric and thermal
conditions often subject to the effects of human action. This was the moment when it first became possible to say that climates could change and be changed.

The backers of the occupation of Egypt reckoned “a time will come when this august land will regain under the influence of the arts of Europe its ancient splendour”. Orientalists’ notion of a degenerate East redeemed by Western politics was hitched to engineers’ ambition for climate change: “these happy changes in peoples’ manners and relations will be the certain consequences of the application of the arts to the natural properties of climates”. 96 This was a key stage both in the naturalisation of the Other within imperialist European erudition and also in the socialisation of nature within aggressive European sciences. There were telling connections between patterns of representation and the pernicious myth of an empty landscape, a nature fit for exploitation and lacking a viable modern history separate from and opposed to imperial domination. 97 Interventions in this kind of record of agency and conflict may help the call to speak to the complex entanglements of states, corporations, and institutions in the roots of the current crisis.

Footnotes

12 The concept of intersectionality, which emerged from the work of Black feminist legal theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw demands that overlapping systems of oppression tied to race, class, gender, and sexuality are not studied in isolation. See “Kimberlé Crenshaw on Intersectionality, More than Two Decades Later”, Columbia Law School, 8 June 2017, https://www.law.columbia.edu/news/archive/kimberle-crenshaw-intersectionality-more-two-decades-later.


Demos, Against the Anthropocene.


A good example of the changing field is the recent special feature: Catherine Grant and Dorothy Price, eds., “Decolonizing Art History”, Art History 43, no. 1 (February 2020): 8–66, https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8365.12490.


The vessels of racial slavery became repurposed as the ships of racial indenture in a violent recycling of labour, an extraction of disposable, fungible life. Black and Asian subjects became racialized and treated as if they were renewable resources, mined from West Africa, mined from Kolkata, mined from Hong Kong. In order to discipline and differentiate these subjects, race was necessary. Taxonomy is an anxious fiction that requires repetition and societies like the Linnean to become true.


Consider, rather than believe Picasso gave Lam the license to examine his Blackness, perhaps Picasso’s unabashed citational extraction of African iconography and masks was natural for a Spaniard. Lam’s situation in the artistic school of Negritude in 1930s Paris makes the reading of his most famous work *La Jungla* (1943) clear. It sits on display at the Museum of Modern Art with a grid-like form that evinces the anthropomorphically violent, taxonomy, and otherworldliness of the sugarcane plantation.


Harris, “Continuity and Discontinuity”, *Selected Writings of Wilson Harris*, 183.


Davis and Todd counter scholarly timelines that locate the Anthropocene at the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, or the advent of the atom bomb, as many geologists have suggested; Heather Davis and Zoe Todd, “On the Importance of a Date, or Decolonizing the Anthropocene”, *ACME: An International Journal for Critical Geographies* 16, no. 4 (2017): 761–780. Recent studies of the geological record have likewise suggested that 1610 is the “golden spike”, or start of the climate crisis. Simon L. Lewis and Mark A. Maslin, “Defining the Anthropocene”, *Nature* 519 (March 2015): 171–180, doi:10.1038/nature14258.


Davis and Todd, “On the Importance of a Date, or Decolonizing the Anthropocene”, 767.


The work is an extension of Willard’s collaborative project BUSH Gallery, a “Conceptual and Experimental Indigenous Led Land-Based Artist Rez-idency”, see http://www.bushgallery.ca; and https://www.taniawillard.ca/gallery/bush-gallery.


Gómez-Barris coined the term “fish-eye episteme”, which involves a cognitive shift to viewpoints beyond the typical limits of human perception.


For intermittent updates on the collective’s sporadic activities, see www.weatheringstation.net.

The “blame” for the bad transition is usually placed at the feet of his evil daughters. For an alternative reading which is more focused on Lear’s role, please see Jennifer Mae Hamilton, “Cataclysmic Shame: Three Views of Lear’s Mortal Body in the Storm”, in This Contentious Storm: An Ecocritical and Performance History of King Lear (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), 65–108.


See Amy M. King, The Divine in the Commonplace: Reverent Natural History and the Novel in Britain (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).


Walcott and Doig, “Grande Riviere I”, 49.


Jean Copains and Jean Jamin (eds), Aux origines de l’anthropologie française (Paris: Editions Jean-Michel Place, 1994).


Climate and Culture Beyond Borders

Worm: art + ecology

Authors

Cite as

With this *British Art Studies* Cover Collaboration feature, which responds to the theme of “British Art and Natural Forces” proposed by the journal’s editors, I bring together four artistic practices alongside my own.¹ They highlight diverse activities among international, socially engaged, creative practices that relate to the core conversations on justice in environmental and climate issues. I encourage us to narrate British artistic engagements with nature through our long-existing and under-represented creative activisms, across geographies and from multiple perspectives of climate justice.

**British Arts in 2020**

Over a decade of austerity policies, the creative climate in the UK has been weathered by relentless state budget cuts to creative education, artistic development, cultural production, and their public arts engagements. It has led to the commercialisation of our arts and higher education institutions, rather than nationalising them for more stable and inclusive public accessibility. But the arts sector is not an isolated sector to have its public purse pinched. Austerity cuts to welfare continue to disintegrate the NHS and state education, and aggravate food and housing injustices, just to name a few immeasurable manifestations of the growing economic disparities in Britain.

**The Culture of Britishness**

What does this have to do with our conversation on British arts and climate change? I’ll firstly problematise the “British” in our British arts, in the current political context of Brexit, the international rise in right-wing nationalisms, and the accelerated injustices as a result of the global health crisis—all of which intersect with climate politics. The UK government is now weaponising the British arts sector to expedite the growing public animosity towards racialised people, exemplified by the state’s overtly racist motives behind its Hostile Environment policies and the Windrush scandal, to enforce the widespread, violent, anti-immigrant hate; and the policing and deportation of racialised people. It also comes in the form of the government’s economic recovery plan for the cultural sector as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, which itself is disproportionately killing racialised and systemically marginalised people in the UK. Specifically, it is the Conservative government’s former “Festival of Brexit” plan, now rebranded with the working title Festival UK* 2022.² The festival is a nationwide “open, original, optimistic” presentation of “UK creativity and innovation” to celebrate post-Brexit British nationalism, while UK border policy remains firmly anti-immigrant.³
Grassroots campaigns by arts workers, namely Migrants in Culture, rally against the festival’s xenophobic propaganda, call for its cancellation, and propose a redistribution of its £120 million budget to aid a fair, sector-wide economic recovery. Similarly, cultural workers’ unions across the country have been striking against mass job losses at major arts institutions, which have received and unevenly distributed the government’s emergency funding, despite the already stark pay gap between low-paid contract workers (including non-art workers, such as cleaners, security, technicians, bar staff, and so on, most with precarious contracts), and directors and managers. In addition to unemployed and furloughed sector workers, arts freelancers have also been struggling with reduced or no work, with some unentitled to welfare. All were controversially advised by the Chancellor to “retrain” for other careers, publicly undermining the cultural sector and the extensive skills of arts professionals. Even with the Culture Recovery Fund, the government took advantage of the vulnerability of arts organisations to manufacture an artwashing publicity exercise, as grants were allocated on the condition that recipients must publicly thank the government beyond the standard requirements via social media, newsletters, and website communications, to further display deep gratitude through “local media outlets”. Many arts organisations, especially the third that were rejected from the Culture Recovery Fund, felt that this outcome further fosters the already toxic atmosphere of scarcity. It also contributes to the divisive competition for survival, based on an organisation’s prestige, size, and region, including the London-centrism of arts funding. With these developments, this moment holds a troubling outlook for the arts in the UK, as the formal cultural sector both economically comprises its core workers, and further excludes us through violent, nationalist ideologies.

**Participation in the Arts**

The accumulation of these changes significantly forecasts diminishing accessibility in British arts participation in the coming generations. Subsequently, it will raze the range of cultural leaders from minoritised backgrounds, who are crucial not only to an equitable arts sector, but also to one that works in tandem with the anti-colonial global climate justice movement. In addition to the pre-existing colonial remnants of the British Empire—such as intergenerational material, social and cultural capital—that leave the cultural elite unscathed by austerity, these further erosions of the cultural sector and public services make the arts in Britain an inhospitable space for many creatives and publics to participate.
This year, primary and secondary school educators have been banned from teaching with “anti-capitalist material”, and were warned that anyone teaching that “white privilege” is an uncontested fact are breaking the law. Critical race and anti-capitalist theories are integral to understanding climate injustices. Those most impacted by race, class, gender, LGBTQIA+, and disability injustices are also the most compromised by social, climate, and environmental injustices. Often arts programming tokenises these groups to fulfil funding criteria, further creating an unsafe space for political arts, evident in the prevalent institutional anti-Black racism. Ultimately, the British arts sector reproduces and normalises the violences of the UK political climate towards minoritised people. Where artistic practices that take climate change issues sincerely into account are inherently political, the increasingly challenging environment in British arts is yet another layer of barriers as we try to operate creatively and politically.

Climate Change and British Arts

Working across climate change and the arts, I see many parallels between two. They both seek to engage audiences with realities and speculations around today’s urgencies. Yet they also integrate systemic barriers that restrict who is resourced to participate in the mainstream, to generate, share, and then eventually archive the types of experiences and knowledges that exist. The white supremacist, patriarchal, capitalist, and ableist structures in the mainstream UK “climate arts” have permeated from its elitist beginnings as part of Europe’s cultural sector. Similarly, the enlightenment-birthed environmental movement in Britain negates and erases the cultures, histories, and experiences of resistance of its former empire. Unethical institutional greenwashing persists through eco-aestheticised public programming, as a continuation of thriving neoliberal ideology, despite—and in order to capitalise on—the overlapping global crises of climate change, racial injustice, and a health crisis exacerbated by our current pandemic.

With this in mind, it is essential that working to communicate climate change issues through the arts must centre and be accountable to the people who have been minoritised by the climate movement, the arts sector, and the state in Britain. Through my curatorial projects under the name Worm: art + ecology, I am interested in creatively communicating anti-colonial climate activities and narratives. These should emphasise inclusive participation in everyday local and global climate activisms that consider racial, disability, class, gender, and LGBTQIA+ justices as directly related. My work interrogates the power structures of climate knowledges, shaped by colonial histories, imperialist sciences, corporate greed, and so on. Further, I see
communal climate knowledges and storytelling as interrelated methods of co-learning, communicating, and interacting with the plurality of histories, presents and futures, facts and dreams.

Self-Archiving

Together with my invited contributors in this feature, I aim to draw alliances across geopolitical borders, languages, and creative activities between them as a group of people, who are individually unbound to one label of researcher, artist, or activist. A selection of our works make equally diverse and complementary cover illustrations for this issue of British Art Studies (Figs 1–5).

![Figure 1.](image)

**Figure 1.**
Sonia E. Barrett, Table No. 6, 2013, wood and metal. Digital image courtesy of Bruno Weiss.
Figure 2.
Angela Camacho and Adriana Buzman, Tinku Warmi, film still. Digital image courtesy of Angela Camacho (CC BY-NC 4.0).

Figure 3.
Michael Leung, Mr. Lam turning the bone-setter illuminated sign on and off for the last time at the front entrance of his home, Yeung UK San Village, Wang Chau, 17 October 2020. Digital image courtesy of Michel Leung (CC BY-NC 4.0).
Sonia E. Barrett is a visual artist who meditates on the grand furnitures of the Great Houses and Estates across the UK, USA, and the Caribbean, which were built on the colonial wealth of the slave industries. In deconstructing and reassembling these mahogany “bodies”, she narrates the violent, extractive histories and migrations of peoples and trees from their lands (Fig. 6). Barrett seeks to intervene her pieces back into the “crime scenes” of the British trusts and estates, which continue to hold colonially amassed wealth through land ownership.
The Bonita Chola (aka Angela Camacho) is a Bolivian Indigenous creative, Bruja, and community organiser living in London, who takes us through her processes of documenting and archiving Indigenous and Afro-descendant community organisers through her social online platform. Her practice comprises colourful, immediate, and shareable image and text cards, which forefront accessibility, in both production and dissemination, of the news and herstories relating to anti-colonial, climate, and social justice issues (Fig. 7).
Michael Leung is an artist/designer and urban farmer in Hong Kong, sharing his research on the British “colonial residue and (non-)indigenous entanglements” in the New Territories. Standing alongside the Wang Chau villagers, who are currently facing eviction by the Hong Kong government, Michael’s watercolour paintings, photos, and anecdotes commune with the villagers’ collective farming, jackfruit harvest festival, campaigning, and everyday co-learning as determined acts of resistance (Fig. 8).
INTERPRT (Nabil Ahmed, Olga Lucko, Svitlana Lavrenchuk, and Filip Wesołowski) are a group of researchers, architects, and spatial designers advocating to criminalise ecocide, crimes against the environment, through the International Criminal Court. The studio’s extensive investigations use geospatial analysis and architectural methodologies to reconstruct cases of environmental violations in both war and peace times (Fig. 9). They gather legislative and activist histories with visual cultures to further demonstrate the contemporary consequences of historical injustices, and to communicate potential tools for justice for climate and environmental frontlines.
For myself, Angela Chan, I introduce a visual research project that considers the biases, time-lining, and power structures of public climate communication framings in the UK. Critiquing a recent water scarcity report as falling short of inclusive and fair framing, I open communal “living room” conversations nationwide with other people from systemically minoritised backgrounds, who are often excluded from mainstream climate justice activities, to map and record our current relationships, practices, and perceptions towards water and its scarcity (Fig. 10).
Through these articulate, informative, and reflective projects, we explore climate and social issues in the homes and communities we inhabit around the world, referring to Britain to contend with its colonial ties to our subjects, places, communities, and selves. We offer insights into various long-term projects and commitments to everyday climate and social justice around the world, with this cover commission as just the beginning of future collaborations and friendship. We destabilise the singular narrative of “the future of” or “the solution to” the climate crisis, as determined by the violent hegemonies that have caused and sustain it. All the while, we carve out our own self-organised archives by overwriting some histories with truth, creating vocabularies to strengthen international solidarity, and narrating our own timelines of place beyond borders.

Footnotes

1 “British Art and Natural Forces” was the theme of the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art’s autumn 2020 research programme. A focal point of the programming was to discuss the relationship between visual representation, art history, and climate change.


Bibliography


Moss Rain Paradox: Refocusing Climate Framings

Angela Chan

Authors

Cite as

Invisible Changes

Climate communication framings influence our perceptions of the global crisis and can inform what actions we choose to take.

*Moss Rain Paradox* is a research project that examines the UK’s imminent water scarcity issues and responds to a spectrum of climate perspectives. From the existing context of governmental and commercial public awareness campaigns (such as *The Great British Rain Paradox*), to forms of intimate and communal everyday participation in climate justice, I document how certain framings pre-emptively determine the futures of our lived realities in the face of climate impacts in the UK.

This project reflects my wider work to centre the perspectives and situations of people who are systemically minoritised by this country’s environmental inequalities, as part of the broader set of social oppressions sustained by racial, class, gender, LGBTQIA+, disability, and immigration injustices.
Mapping Climate Framings

The Great British Rain Paradox prompts my investigation into current nationwide climate framings on our water scarcity crisis, which is projected to impact the UK in as soon as twenty years’ time. The report was published in June 2020 by RB Finish, with support from the Love Water campaign and a foreword by the Chief Executive of the Environmental Agency. It reveals the public’s lack of awareness as being dependent on the perception of the isles as a place of frequent rainfall, and thus formed by the invisibility of climate change.

Central to the report’s analysis of water scarcity influences are household consumer habits and it proposes behavioural changes to conserve water usages in light of “climate change and population growth”. I critique the dangerous eco-fascism in Malthusian claims, opposing it to more correct assessments based on consumption footprints. This is especially important in revealing the prevalent high wastage behaviours spurred by the neglectful state environmental deregulations of profiting, extractive, greenwashing corporations, as well as the most affluent in society, who have higher access to materially and socially wasteful habits.

Moss Rain Paradox attempts to map how biases in today’s widespread climate framings are calculated, speculative scenarios that not only inform public awareness by relaying facts but can also shape it through socio-political agendas. Critically, framings hold the influence to enact further framings through media dissemination and wider public discussions. Often climate culprits, such as the fossil fuel industry and complicit governing partners, deflect their accountability to the crisis by producing narratives to blame others and deter them from their responsibility towards reparative change and solutions. It is important not to underestimate how such framings can seed xenophobia through pre-emptive or remedial solutions to our state- and corporation-induced global crisis.

Those most at risk of being negatively framed are people marginalised by racial, economic, and a range of social exclusions, who are already compromised by systemic injustices. The oncoming water crisis only threatens the rise of an already unjust and unsafe situation. With this, tracking the framings of the UK’s mainstream water scarcity campaigns, alongside more communally and personally held ones at a citizen level, offers an insight into the varying subjectivity of public awareness communications and how they determine the evolving political challenge.
Pre-Existing Futures

Through a selection of video and audio recordings, I open communal “living room” conversations around the UK, to talk about water in a more personal light with other people of minoritised backgrounds, who are often excluded from mainstream climate conversations.

Together, we enlarge the framings of water issues with relatable, intergenerational, and diasporic experiences and memories of water practices and sense of place. We also determine how existing anti-colonial
climate organising speculates to the near futures—ones which are not time signalled by catastrophe deadlines but to futures informed by already lived, communally remembered histories.

The wider interactive body of research, documentation, and imaginings of *Moss Rain Paradox* acts as a collective self-archive of our framings on climate impacts and water scarcity in the UK, in light of *The Great British Rain Paradox* report. I hope it speaks as much to the (in)visibility of the water issues, as to our experiences, anxieties, and hopes, which are not reflected in nationwide surveys and reports conducted by the state or corporate entities.

Further, it advocates for critical assessments of biases in public climate change framings, to recentre ethics and justice. The interpersonal discussions also explore nationwide developments of eco-anxiety and climate grief, as we contend with our overlapping climate, health, and social crises.

![Figure 5.](image)

_Angela Chan, Mapping Moss Triptych, 2020, animated GIF. Digital image courtesy of Angela Chan (CC BY-NC 4.0)._  

**Knowing Worlds**

Mosses have been my subject of regular video recording for several years. I document their shapes, colours, and tactility in urban and rural places—often to the natural soundscapes of trickling water and the hum of surrounding activities. I bring their smallness and softness to a social media feed; it is a reminder to rehydrate and recalibrate a sense of groundedness, while we roam timelessly in the digital space.
In my speculative fiction writing alongside this research project, I lean towards mosses as the biotechnology we often invisibilise, even in proximate landscapes. They are frequently used as organic remote sensing devices to monitor air and water pollution, in what is known as bryomonitoring. I imagine them, with their agency as environmental communicators, in a longer-term conversation with us about climate change and water conservation and storage, particularly within the two decades to come.

As bryologist and writer Robin Wall Kimmerer offers, “Knowing our mosses enriches our knowing of the world”. ² My narrative magnifies the close and responsive relationships that mosses have with their environments and other actors over time, to recentre this attentiveness and responsiveness to the processes we make towards water resilience as a form of social and climate justice.

Footnotes


2 Robin Wall Kimmerer, Gathering Moss: A Natural And Cultural History Of Mosses (Corvallis, OR: Oregon State University Press, 2003), 11.
Beyond Interspecies Objectification
Sonia E. Barrett

Authors

Cite as
These sculptures are an intervention in the furnished spaces of multigenerational European wealth dating back to the eighteenth century. They respond to the great estates in the UK, the USA, and the Caribbean that have been part of my research.

I, my name, and countless others are a product of these kinds of estates.
These works reveal comfortable spaces uncomfortably. They disrupt the furnished rest that happened in them. The furnished rest of the visitor’s eye in what are now roped-off spaces in great houses. The furnished rest in certain gentlemen’s clubs, educational institutions, and establishment boardrooms.

These spaces are full of mahogany, carved and embellished to the Queen Anne style.
Figure 3.
Sonia E. Barrett, Still from Furniture Performance 17, 2013.
Digital image courtesy of Bruno Weiss (all rights reserved).
I researched Queen Anne style and found it is the most revived form of furniture style in Europe. I started performing this furniture and discovered that my brown, floored fist translated into the lion paw of these chairs and tables. When I paired these legs, they started to look like black and brown feet.
Figure 5.
Sonia E. Barrett, Table No. 6, 2013, wood and metal. Digital image courtesy of Bruno Weiss (all rights reserved).

My process involves sitting with furniture that is made up of trees ripped from the Tropics and shipped in the same ways that people were in the triangular trade.

The profits from slavery and the profits from tropical hardwoods created the excess wealth, which enabled the extravagant furnishings we see in so many great houses.

I sit with, and not on, until I know what the chair or table wants to articulate, wants to do or share.

Often the chair, table, or tray becomes a singular body. One that stands for many that we cannot find, name, know, or hear from—all as a result of slavery.
My research in Crime Fiction theory led me to understand the cathartic value of the single knowable victim and perpetrator in the face of many unknown bodies and multiple causes of death.

These “corpses” hover in their materiality and form between the plant (tropical tree/wood), the person (black or brown figure), the animal (lion feet/leather), and the object (chair/table). The plants, persons, and species that were ripped from their homes are objectified in stately homes.
Without words, some works voice multi-species trauma, the impossibility of escape, the defiance, the resistance, the labour of living.

The wholly undepicted.

The works are often “corpse popping”—expanding the ideas of what passes for the living and what can be mourned.

Embodying their own response to the totality of the devastation that enabled the great house and its estate.

The “body” should be laid in the drawing and reception rooms of the great house, reconstructing them as the scenes of the crimes. I consider this placement of the work to be part of the intervention.
I have been working towards such an intervention for four years now. Mostly, I have been dealing with the UK’s biggest landowners in attempts to return these bodies without success. Up until now, the works have intervened in galleries, outside villas, and festival off-spaces, speaking to those furnished houses from afar.

Only this year did it dawn on me that trying to situate this work in the great house is perhaps my attempt to belong. Within many Indigenous societies, to create a grave somewhere is to enter into a sacred contract with that site. A contract that requires a commitment and labour that is lifelong, that is to be passed down to the next generation. I realised I don’t know if I am ready for that. Close to my goal now, I find I hesitate.
Wang Chau Village: (Non-)Indigenous Wisdom, Amidst Eviction

Michael Leung

Authors

Cite as

I first met the Wang Chau villagers in February 2017 during an action in a commercial district in Hong Kong. Wang Chau is a village in the New Territories with 200 households, 500 villagers and pets, surrounded by trees and small farms and gardens. During these past three years, I have learned details about the colonial residue and the Indigenous and non-Indigenous dichotomy that has led to the dispossession of the villagers’ homes and the ongoing destruction of the green belt village.

“Wang Chau Village: (Non-)Indigenous Wisdom, Amidst Eviction,” available for download on the next slide, is a paper written for the Association for Asian Studies conference (September 2020), which was presented in a panel with anthropologists focusing on land and sea practices and food sovereignty. Since starting my PhD in 2018, I have shared bilingual texts freely online and through zines—available at zine fairs and for free. The zine format allows a more intimate reading experience and becomes a tangible object that can be gifted to others, self-organised libraries, archives, and so on.
The indigenous villagers were granted land rights by the British colonial government following a six-day imperial war in 1898. However, the hegemonic and patriarchal land policies that favour indigenous villagers in the New Territories are a colonial residue that continue to discriminate indigenous women, dispossess non-indigenous villagers whilst privileging males in indigenous families with land and building rights, known as the Small House Policy—introduced in 1972.
When I first joined a tour of Wang Chau in 2017, I saw a monochrome village map that loosely looked like a metro subway map, showing different places in the village such as Wong Bak’s village well and the Fung Chi Village entrance. I kindly offered to do a painting of the village for the 2017 Wang Chau Jackfruit Festival. In the following three festivals, with villagers and members of the concern group, I updated the map to its latest 2020 iteration—which is unfortunately likely to be the last amidst the eviction. However, Ms Cheng told me last week, that perhaps we can replant some Wang Chau jackfruit trees in other places and have the next jackfruit festivals elsewhere.

Please download a double-sided PDF of the map here.

![Wang Chau Jackfruit Festival Map](image)

**Figure 2.**
**Figure 3.**

**Figure 4.**

This painting depicts an imaginary clothes line with four different garments. From the left to right, they are: a sleeveless shirt worn by village protectors in 1899, when anti-imperial villagers threatened to attack villages, who refused to join the war against the British colonial government (?? Strong and Brave); a white T-shirt hand painted by villagers early in the movement (?? Injustice), a T-shirt gifted to me from the Wang Chau Green Belt Concern Group (???? ??? No Eviction No Demolition, We Swear to Protect Our Home);
and a poncho worn by land protectors at the ZAD (Zone à Défendre, Zone to Defend) in Notre-Dame-des-Landes, resisting the construction of an airport and its world (ZAD Partout, ZADs Everywhere).

Figure 5.
Michael Leung, ???????!(The land is our home and not a commodity!), 2017–2020, calligraphy on photograph. Digital image courtesy of Michael Leung.

???????!(The land is our home and not a commodity!) is composed on top of a photograph of a faded and weathered banner in Wing Ning Village, Wang Chau. The sheet metal fencing surrounds a green belt area that has been acquired by New World Development Company Limited in Wing Ning Village. The original photograph was taken on 3 May 2017. The calligraphy was added on 14 November 2020. At present there are eleven villages facing dispossession in Hong Kong. Hopefully the message on this banner can be helpful in some way and connect villagers from different land struggles together.
Figure 1.
Angela Camacho and Adriana Buzman, Tinku Warmi, film, 2 minutes 5 seconds, 2019.

TINKU WARMI (Idioma Aymara, “Encuentro Mujeres”)

Mis manos saludan al tata Inti en cualquier parte del mundo
saludan cansadas de no sentir pero siempre recuerdan
que son hijas wawas de la tierra
somos Indígenas Indígenas Decendientes Y en la piel
una no siente la aucensia de la madre tierra por que somos su continuidad
somos la extención de la pacha y la llebamos con nosotras
a todos lados a todas partes, La sentimos completa
Su abundancia Su dolor
Tu perdida.
Caminamos por que nuestra piel

My hands greet our tata inti (sun) in all corners of the world;
they wave, fatigued from unfeeling but remembering always
that they are daughters of the wawas (kids) of the Earth.
we are Indígenas, Indigenous descendants and in our bones
we do not feel removed from la madre tierra because we are continuum, we are the scope of our Pacha (mother earth) and we carry her with us
wherever we are wherever we go; We feel her wholly;
Her abundance Her pain
Her loss.
We march on because our very skin has never stopped existing
We march on to carve a new path
We march on from here to there, near and far each step marking empowerment, a cry for dignity.
nunca ha dejado de existir
caminamos para crear un
nuevo camino

caminamos aquí haya cerca lejos
cada uno de nuestros pasos marca soberanía, grita dignidad en nuestro pensamiento

en nuestra realidad no existe la ausencia de la madre tierra.

Como será eso nos preguntamos?

The Bonita Chola uses images of strong activist female role models from the Abya Yala, Indigenous, and Black communities, who have been ignored and erased by history. She evokes collective memories and stories of struggle through digital collage making. With only her mobile phone, she creates tools with minimum resources to share with grassroots organising back home, to explore the reconstruction and deconstruction of identity, and focus on her inner feelings and thoughts.

View this illustration online

**Figure 2.**
Angela Camacho, Collaging, film, 13 seconds, 2020.

View this illustration online

**Figure 3.**
Angela Camacho, Collaging 2, film, 13 seconds, 2020.
Figure 4.
Angela Camacho_5_IG,

Figure 5.
Angela Camacho_6_group-1,
Figure 6.
Angela Camacho_7_IndigenousResistanceDay,

DÍA DE LA RESISTENCIA INDÍGENA (Indigenous Resistance Day)

Text by The Bonita Chola and @ja_kgender, translation by The Bonita Chola. This text is an excerpt from their essay “From Colonial Barbarism to the Present of Capitalist Looting: Abya Yala (So-Called Americas) in Struggle”.

...On 12 October 1492, the colonisation began by means of which the gigantic original capitalist accumulation was perpetrated, which promoted the Industrial Revolution and European supremacy worldwide and which threw the Abya Yala peoples into centuries of colonial plunder and later into centuries of neocolonialism and capitalist plunder. From the genocide and looting perpetrated during the colonisation, the aristocracy and the European bourgeoisie accumulated an unprecedented fortune, which would propel Europe as a capitalist metropolis. The British and European population
colony—that today is known as the United States—would also propel itself as a capitalist metropolis based on slavery and the expansionist policy of its bourgeoisie, who would assume the predatory continuity against the rest of the continent.

The world’s greatest fortunes were built through genocide, deportation, enslavement, and looting. The current geopolitical relations between capitalist metropolises and the peripheries of capitalism have a historical origin marked in blood. The members of the exploiting class in the American continent, from north to south, are the direct descendants of colonial barbarism and are the accomplices of the looting perpetrated by transnational capitalism (slave fortunes continue to prevail, along with new looters).

For 528 years since October 1492, we verify the continuity of the struggle of the Abya Yala (America) people, as well as the continuing predatory behaviour of imperialism. The peoples rise up, against capitalism and their barbarism, against the bourgeois states who agree to poisoned loans with imperialist institutions like the IMF, whose amounts will go to the infrastructure required by the multinationals, to increase plundering the resources and line the pockets of the bourgeoisie, and whose usury interests the peoples will have to pay with their blood...

Figure 7.
Angela Camacho_9_group,
1. Afro-Latino, Afro-Caribbean and Diaspora Women’s Day has been celebrated every 25 July since 1992.

2. Cultural Relevance. The central axis of this commemoration is the struggle for inclusion, for justice and equality for Afro-descendant women in Latin America and the Caribbean. Likewise, that first meeting on 25 July 1992 in the Dominican Republic is commemorated, the starting point for the struggle towards the vindication and visibility of Afro-Latino, Afro-Caribbean, and Diaspora women.
of the Afro woman and all her cultural and social contributions in the conformation of the States, a struggle marked by advocacy for the change and structural transformation of racial discrimination, violence, sexism, exclusion, poverty, and migration.

3. History. This commemoration was instituted in 1992, within the framework of the First Meeting of Afro-Latin and Afro-Caribbean Women held in the Dominican Republic. Around 400 women from different countries in Latin America and the Caribbean met, in order to analyse the consequences of racism and sexism in the region, articulate actions to combat it and honour Afro-descendant women leaders of this struggle.

4. With this meeting, the Network of Afro-Latin American, Afro-Caribbean and Diaspora Women emerged. It recognises itself as a space for reflection and commitment to work for the rights of Black women, in their capacity as full and committed citizens with the construction of more just and equitable nations.

5. The commemoration of this date should invite us to have an intersectional look at the situation of Afro-descendant women, to claim their existence and their struggles, to respect their culture and their manifestations; and to address their contexts in a differentiated way, traversed by violence as a product of racism, colonization, sexism, classism, capitalism, homo-lesbo-transphobia, and other oppressions.

In the collage on the previous page are: Ochy Curiel, Victoria Santa Cruz, Marialle Franco, Sueli Carneiro, and Liniker.
Figure 9.
Angela Camacho_12_group (1),
Today we reaffirm and remember that *cisheterosexualidad* is a colonial system. Sexual diversity has historically been the norm, not the exception, among Indigenous peoples. The ancestral languages prove it. In Juchitán, Mexico, the muxes are neither male nor female, but rather a hybrid of both as the Zapotec gender. For our brothers of North America, the identity “two spirits” refers to a person who identifies male and female, and is used by some Indigenous people to describe their sexual, gender and/or spiritual identity.
In the Andes region of what is now called Bolivia, we have the word “Chacha-Warmi”, which means man-woman. In Hawai’i, the māhū encompass both the feminine and the masculine. The Maori term takatāpui describes intimate same-sex friendships. Non-monogamy is the norm among the Zo’é peoples in the Amazon and the Ladakhis in the Himalayas. In other words, Indigenous sexualities/sexual identities were never heterosexual: from cross-dressing to homo-affective families, they are as diverse as the peoples who practise them. The disagreements that belong to Indigenous communities are doubly segregated. Despite the fact that both machismo and heteronorma were systems of violence imposed by colonialism, they continue to prevail in most Indigenous communities. The resistance of the communities is a double struggle: they have to choose between living their diverse identity or their Indigenous identity.

Mucho amor y fuego en su lucha! Que es la nuestra tambien, quemar la heteronorma y el patriarcado: RESABIOS DE LA COLONIZACIÓN!
INTERPRT is a research and design studio dedicated to environmental justice. Working with civil society organisations, we undertake long-form investigations about under-represented environmental violations using geospatial analysis and architectural methodologies.

There is currently no International Criminal Law to protect the environment against ecological destruction and the climate emergency. That is why we advocate for criminalising “ecocide” as part of the Stop Ecocide Campaign. It is within this context that our studio has been exploring legislative and activist history at the intersection of environmental protection and international justice using visual culture.

Broadly speaking, our visual research has closely looked at the few legal precedents where environmental destruction was considered as part of the evidence of war crimes. It has examined how environmental protection in times of peace was excluded in the systematic development of international crimes. And it has tried to chart the counter-history of how civil society has kept alive the hopes of criminalising ecocide in the passionate demand for protecting the planet.

View this illustration online

**Figure 1.**
INTERPRT, The campaign to make ecocide an international crime, video explainer, 2020. Digital image courtesy of INTERPRT (CC BY-NC 4.0).
Figure 2.
Earth Law, Museon, The Hague, 2018. Digital image courtesy of INTERPRT (CC BY-NC 4.0). Exhibition and microsite in collaboration with Polly Higgins and Ecological Defence Integrity held in conjunction with the 17th Assembly of State Parties (ASP) of the International Criminal Court (ICC).
In 1947, as part of the United Nations War Crimes Commission (UNWCC), Poland listed eleven German administrators and foresters as war criminals for the devastation of Polish forests using scientific forestry. Case no. 1307, as it was filed with the UNWCC, sets one of the earliest precedents of
criminal charges for environment destruction. We reconstructed Case no. 1307 combining archival research, interviews, aerial imagery, and LiDAR analysis.

Figure 5.
Race and Forest (Rasa i Las), solo exhibition, Warsaw Biennale, 2020. Digital image courtesy of INTERPRT (CC BY-NC 4.0).

Figure 6.
Chełmno was the first of the extermination camps of the Holocaust situated near Łódź in central Poland. In 1942, a secret reforestation programme was carried out here with the crushed bones of victims used as fertiliser whose sole purpose was to hide the traces of mass killing. We used airborne 3D laser scanning (LiDAR) that penetrated the trees to reveal the microtopography of the ground underneath, the first such survey carried out at the site. The remote sensing investigation allowed us to better understand Rzuchowski forest as living evidence of the environmental dimensions of mass atrocity crimes and their forgotten histories.

View this illustration online

**Figure 7.**
INTERPRT, Living Evidence, single channel video, 12 minutes 14 seconds. Home Works 8/Beirut Art Center, 2019. Digital image courtesy of INTERPRT (all rights reserved).

Archival research about the legal and alternative forums in which the status of the natural environment under international justice was defined, prosecuted, and contested: the United Nations and the International Law Commission; International criminal tribunals and courts; citizen’s tribunals, campaigns, and other civil society platforms. Following COVID-19 restrictions, the posters were sent to cultural institutions across Poland.
2019
Papież Franciszek nawiątuje do uznańienia ekobójstwa jako zbrodni międzynarodowej i grzechu ekologicznego.

SPRAWIEDLIVOŚĆ POLITYCZNA obejmuje działanie społeczeństwa obywatelskiego, dotkliwej z kryzysu Globalnej Północy, mające na celu doprowadzenie do wprowadzenia ekobójstwa do praw międzynarodowych. Od budujących czasów wojny w kwestii kryzysu klimatycznym, organizacje obywatelskie energetycznie aktywizują w obronie Ziemi na gruntach prawa karnego. To właściwe są problemy prawne dotyczących środowiska i antropocenizmu w międzynarodowym systemie prawa karnego jest punktem wyjścia dla tej naszej pracy.

Figure 8.
The Ecological Imperative, Poster series “Civil justice” (in collaboration with Jakub de Barbaro), Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, 2020. Translation: “Pope Francis calls for the recognition of ecocide as international crime and ecological sin”. Digital image courtesy of INTERPRT (CC BY-NC 4.0).
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