

Swaying

by

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Declaration of Committee

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Abstract

Swaying is a project that exhibits a personal processing of the COVID-19 pandemic through a photographic series informed by a diaristic process. Each photograph marks a different happening, thought or emotion and utilizes photographic and contemporary art theories as a guide to interpreting these happenings and thoughts. This series consists of thirteen photographs and speaks to a range of subjects such as, 'world-making,' the grotesque, sublime, science-fiction and punctum as some examples of the what informs this project. *Swaying* externalizes the inner thought process and shares an intimate exploration of relating to a changing world.

Keywords: Photographs; diary; pandemic; photographic theory; externalize

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Installation photo by Rachel Topham



Installation photo by Rachel Topham

Defence Statement

Swaying is a photographic series of images created from March 2020 to September 2020 during the continued global COVID-19 pandemic. This series contains both the sublime and the unsettling and speaks towards the possibilities of depicting a felt experience and externalizing an internalized relationship to this changing world. Each photograph is constructed using different forms of digital and physical manipulation and references different photographic and contemporary art theories. These theories work as a guide to understanding my relationship to this changing world. Written like a diary, this thesis statement details different happenings during this time and how the resulting photographic work is created in response. This project looks directly at my interpretation of the world around me as one that has quickly and drastically changed, addressing fears and anxieties and a disruption of the everyday.

March 28, 2020 / *Apple*



Photo 1. Apple

I am in the final days of self-isolation after returning back from Scotland and the days each take a similar form. I have been doing laundry in my bathtub and people have been dropping off food for me. Genta and some friends have visited me in the alleyway below my window.

There is a rhythm to the days which makes time move very fast as the days' similarities make them all feel interchangeable. However, this afternoon the usual cycle

of the day was disrupted when I was sitting at my desk and I heard yelling in this same alleyway. There were two men in a fight below me. One man was attacking the other, picking him up like a doll and throwing him against the pavement. A crowd gathered around as people tried to interject. Many people were yelling and screaming. Multiple people were calling 911 and soon an ambulance arrived and one of the men took off running. People began chasing him and I could hear sirens block off the other end of the alleyway. I watched the paramedics rush out, people all around clapped quietly as they placed the injured man on a gurney and drove off with him to the hospital. His partner couldn't go with him because of COVID. The ambulance took off and she stood there surrounded by people, distantly waiting as his shirt and blood, and one shoe sat strewn across the pavement.

It was a sickly feeling to witness such violence from above, like you would in a theatre, almost as though enough distance could make it seem unreal, that such an overt form of violence couldn't be acted out on such a mundane afternoon. I wanted to make a photograph that reflected this witnessed violence and spoke to how horror can reveal itself in unexpected ways. In this photograph, *Apple*, there is a disruption of the familiar object of the apple which is punctured by the human hair. In this collision of unexpected pairings the grotesque is depicted. Tess Thackara who is an arts and culture journalist writes about the grotesque and describes how “a profound awareness of human mortality is rarely far from the surface when it comes to the grotesque” (par 9). I am drawn to this statement when considering that this image was constructed after witnessing such violence. I am considering the viewers' experience in witnessing this image and I hope to trigger a physiological response of disgust that clashes with the palpable lighting structure which nods towards production photography known for being easily consumable.

By using an object as familiar as an apple I wanted to juxtapose this symbol of mundanity with the hair acting as a bodily and unwelcomed presence. Thackara writes that “this recalibration of one's relationship to the object engages the body as it tries to gauge whether the foreign article is a source of threat or attraction—perhaps both” (par 3). It is this balance between the threat and attraction that draws us to look, and also to be left with a sense of fear or disgust. Wolfgang Kayser, a scholar who wrote about the grotesque in literature said that, the grotesque world is an, “estranged world,” in which an ominous and unnamed presence is felt (Chao 308). It is this disruption of the present

world which I am keen to exhibit in my own work. The depiction of the grotesque allows the discomfort we might feel in the world to be visually seen, externalizing the felt presence of the grotesque in the everyday.

April 2, 2020 / *Ladybugs*



Photo 2. *Ladybugs*

I went to the post office today to mail a train pass back to a company in New York City. The train pass was meant to be used while I was in Europe but it was never used. It was my first day leaving self-isolation and entering into the world again. I felt strangely nervous about going to the post office and being surrounded by people.

On my way to the post office, I walked past the UPS store in the Denman Mall, where I get all of my printing done for school readings. I looked to see if Jason was behind the counter, but I didn't see him. In February, I had gone there to have some of my flight documents printed before leaving for Scotland. COVID-19 was in the news, but its threat felt distant. Jason saw my flight details and asked me to cancel my trip; he told me I would definitely get sick, that it was not a risk worth taking. I thought he was overreacting at the time. I thought he was trying to scare me, but I had greatly underestimated that we would soon face a global pandemic.

I looked at my train ticket and it reminded me of what was going to be and what will now never be. It is a similar feeling of looking at a photograph in the melancholy way one looks back and remembers a moment that has come and passed. This sense of finality one can feel in an object or an image is in line with how Roland Barthes and Susan Sontag both wrote about the photograph as an object in relationship with death. In her article, "Looking At War: Photographs view of Devastation and Death," Sontag writes that, "photography has kept company with death ever since cameras were invented, in 1839. Because an image produced with a camera is, literally, a trace of something brought before the lens, photographs had an advantage over any painting as a memento of the vanished past and the dear departed" (par 16). It is this marker of a vanishing past that I relate to in the process of looking at a photo, a reminder of what once was, and now is forever gone. In *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes writes how in photographs, "there is always a defeat of time in them: that is dead and that is going to die...it is because each photograph always contains this imperious sign of my future death" (96-97). Corinna Tsakiridou interprets Barthes photographic relationship to death, and writes how, "in every photograph a mirror is raised to the body in us that is dying and which, though we cannot see it, is already taking on the petrified consistency of a funereal mask. Photography brings this about no matter what its content" (274).

When I arrived home from the post office I set up a mini studio in my living room and I thought about this idea of the link between photography and death and decided to make a direct depiction of this by creating a memento mori. I took ladybugs that I had found dead and dried up in a light fixture and began to place them on the branch of the flowers. I took multiple photographs moving the three ladybugs I had to different areas of the branch simulating in the photograph that there were more than there really were and also that they resembled living ladybugs.

The memento mori was and still is utilized to document deceased family members and loved ones. Sometimes eyes would be painted on to create a more realistic sense of life in the person who had died and sometimes the deceased person might also be propped up to look as though they were standing. The term memento mori directly translates to, remember you must die. It reminds me of my own impermanence. I suppose there is a heightened anxiety surrounding my own mortality and others in relation to the pandemic which may have drawn me to bring to life a subject that was dead, creating a moment that never could be.

April, 12, 2020 / Hands



Photo 3. Hands

In the afternoon I went out for a long walk by myself in the rain. When I was returning home, the low hanging clouds made the sky very grey. It was quiet on the street; hardly anyone was there. At one point I saw a woman walking towards me on the narrow sidewalk. I crossed the road so we could both have more space. As she approached me, we held each other's gaze for a moment, and we both kept walking past each other in opposite directions. I was shocked by how much she resembled me. I wondered what her name was and if she saw her own familiarity in me too. It's one of those moments that happen so quickly, and you wonder if your eyes could have played tricks on you. It felt uncanny to see her, a reflection of oneself walking past me but also a total stranger. According to a study conducted by Teghan Lucas with the University of Adelaide, "there is a 1 in 135 chance that each person has a doppelgänger...[however] there is about 1 in a trillion chance that they will walk past you" (Gorvett). I don't mean to claim that I witnessed my doppelgänger, but I did see someone who looked so much like me. It was both exciting and alarming. In her book, *The Photographic Uncanny: Photography, Homelessness, and Homesickness* art historian Claire Raymond examines how the uncanny within photography can be used as a vehicle for questioning

accepted everyday structures. Raymond writes how “the symbolism of the double¹...is a sign of the uncanny as a kind of doom. To see one's doppelganger is to receive an ominous message” (146).

I question if this sense of seeing myself in another is related to the pandemic; is it a subconscious desire to feel connected to people or reflect the uncanny sense within my own body? As I thought about this person, I wanted to construct an image that reflected this experience and disruption of the self. I photographed my left hand twice in different positions and photoshopped them together to look like one set of arms. I wanted the image to be very subtle in revealing this uncanny sense of both depicting and disrupting my own bodily form. The uncanny follows me throughout this experience with the pandemic as I continually question if my body is a threat to others, possibly harbouring COVID-19 in an asymptomatic form. Raymond writes how the uncanny has, “a feeling of return to the known merged with an eerie difference” (138). During this pandemic my body is both familiar and a site of questioning or even danger to others.

¹ When discussing the symbolism of the double, Raymond is informed by Freud and Ernst Jentsch.

April 29, 2020 / Tree Light



Photo 4. Tree Light

I had to send my name and number into a special registry to get access to walk in the mountains. Since the pandemic started all of the provincial parks have been shut down. Genta and I went through a booth, and they checked our ID's and allowed us through. As we turned the corner we saw a coyote run by us and multiple bear scats marked the road. I had never seen markers of life like this on this road before. So often, it is busy and packed with people on their way up the mountain. Today it was so quiet, and no one was around except for people biking. It reminded me of walking along the old highway that was discarded once the new highway up to Whistler was built. The trees wove their way across the old pavement, and plants cracked through the old road, moss and pine needles covering what once was a highway. So quickly, the land consumes what isn't meant to be there.

We began walking in the forest it was quiet and still and felt like an expansive space to be in after so much time in our small apartment. As we were walking in the forest I began to take photographs of my surroundings. We were on a trail that I have been going to since I was a child.

Genta was beside me holding a small mirror that I had brought with me. As I was setting up my camera he reflected the light off of the mirror onto the trees around us, moving the light rapidly around to different trees. I took a few photos trying to capture the moving light. When I looked back at the photos I was struck by an image that has captured the light centred on one of the trees. The image elicited an emotional response for me, one of a melancholy ache, perhaps it is the solitude in the image but I am not sure. When I try to make sense of this image I am reminded of what Roland Barthes describes as punctum. Barthes wrote how “a photograph’s punctum is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)” (27). Barthes wrote how the punctum is like a, “sting, speck, cut, little hole” (27). Punctum happens when looking at an image and the viewer is struck by an aspect of it that impacts them for whatever reason, the punctum may be different for different people.

When I went home I printed this photo to look at it closer, I assumed it was the dot of light that almost literally pierces the image that would be the punctum, but it also was the brightness and the tangle and layered branches. Barthes wrote that, “what I can name cannot really prick me. The incapacity to name is a good symptom of disturbance...the effect is certain but unlocatable” (51). The effect in this image is unlocatable but I also wonder how much the times we are currently in dictate how or if a viewer, or in this case, myself, experiences punctum in an image. If perhaps we place more value in images that lack a clear narrative because that is also reflective of something many of us are experiencing in our own lives.

May 20, 2020 / Shadow



Photo 5. Shadow

I woke up early and biked into Stanley Park with Genta. All of the roads were shut down to cars, and we biked to a parking lot that was entirely empty as the morning sun rose over the trees behind us. I sent a photo of us to my friend who lives in Halifax. She left Vancouver a few years ago, and we would always walk here together. I send her photos now and then as little markers of the past and as a way to stay connected.

I'm reminded of how so much of our communication right now is through images, still and moving. I think about the separation many people are experiencing from their loved ones and how images allow them to witness each other through this time. Many people are separated by borders and distance and also the need to stay apart for safety. Even though there is more allowance now on who you can spend time with and cases have currently dropped here, there is still a need for distance. Our images keep us feeling connected and seen; they mark our existence during a time when many people might be totally isolated. The camera acts as a tool for witnessing the self when we are alone.

On that same morning, I photographed Genta's shadow against a tree, slightly disjointed as the angles of his shadow is cast over pavement grass, and a tree. When I am alone, I photograph my own shadow often as a marker of where I have been and what I have seen. The shadow is a marker of that existence and experience, even if no one else is there to see it or witness me. Barthes writes that, "every photograph is a certificate of presence" (87).

I keep coming back to this shadow photograph that acts as proof of once being there. It is a strong human desire to be witnessed and be seen in our lives. Photo theorist John Berger writes that:

Photographs bear witness to a human choice being exercised in a given situation. A photograph is a result of the photographer's decision that it is worth recording that this particular event or this particular object has been seen....At its simplest the message, decoded, means: I have decided that seeing this is worth recording. This is equally true of very memorable photographs and the most banal snapshots. What distinguishes the one from the other is the degree to which the photograph explains the message, the degree to which the photograph makes the photographer's decision transparent and comprehensible. (Berger and Dyer 264)

I am drawn to the idea of an image 'being worth recording,' and how that relates to our current use of photos being depictions often of the most mundane things, and yet still there is a desire to document them and show others, this is what I did, this is what I saw. How does this level of worth allocated to an image change during a time like this when images sometimes, even often, replace verbal conversation? I suppose when Berger talks about the idea of the "photographer's decision [being] transparent and comprehensible" (292), it is the decision to share moments in one's life and construct a narrative for others to see and witness whether it is mundane or moving, or authentic or fake. The photograph allows us to prove that we exist and how we exist.

June 20, 2020 / Birds in the Ocean



Photo 6. Birds in the Ocean

In the afternoon I drove out to Boundary Bay with my parents and sister to meet my cousin's new baby at my aunt and uncle's house. We all sat in separate parts of the garden and the baby came out on display for us to look at him. My nephew walked over to the baby and one of us, in his 'bubble', had to intercept him to make sure that distance was kept. My other nephew who can't talk yet walked over to me with his hands out gesturing that he wanted hand sanitizer. It is a new way that we interact with each other and I wonder how children process these changes.

Later that day we walked out to the beach, it is a long and flat beach that borders the United States. When we were younger we used to walk across the border along a horse trail to buy cheaper candy, or sometimes we would swim over the border line in the ocean. About ten years or more ago they started to monitor the border here and now border patrollers don't let you do that anymore.

As everyone sat at the beach I walked out into the water and watched a flock of birds move together over the ocean. I watched how they crossed the border line and then came back over, moving in an amazing synchronicity. They moved with so much freedom untethered from any constriction and worries.

I came back to where my family was sitting and I took my oldest nephew into the ocean to play and swim in the water. As we sat in the water he described to me a drawing he had done for his preschool teacher after his school was shut down at the start of the pandemic. While we sat in the water he asked me if people can die from the virus. It was a precarious balance to not lie to him but to also not scare him. In answering his questions I told him how some people are totally fine and some people get sick and some people get really sick. I avoided confirming that yes many people have died from this, I don't think he needed to hear that. He seemed satisfied with the answer and went back to playing as children do, oscillating between processing challenging or sometimes upsetting subjects and then playing.

I thought about the stories we construct to shape how we interpret and talk about the world. How some stories are filled with hope of radical change and others are dystopic and foreboding. When I returned home I wanted to utilize the photographs of the birds to construct my own reference to these thoughts. I took multiple photos and I began to edit them together to include more birds. I edited out all of the boats in the background and heightened the exposure in the image creating a reconstruction of a landscape, a quiet blend of reality and fiction. I wanted to depict a construction of the world around us but one that leaned into a more hopeful depiction of the world. In the article, "Making Worlds in Art and Science Fiction," Dr. Amelia Barikin writes about the idea of "world-making" within contemporary art. Barikin explores how the idea of "world-making" is dependent on how easily inhabitable the piece of art can become for the viewer and how if the work is believable then the viewer can commit to the fallacy it may be depicting. Barikin writes how, "for artists, confronting the 'condition' of the present often begins not with a question of delineation but of navigation: how to work with rather than work out the powerful tension between a limitless fantastical wilderness and the real business of being-in-the-world" (10).

Birds in the Ocean is a photo that speaks to the ways we subtly practice "world-making" in our own lives. I was intrigued by this idea of working between fantasy and reality and constructed this image to be close enough to reality that it could be easily assumed to be a snapshot rather than the highly manipulated image it is. I think about this in terms of talking to my nephew in ways of constructing realities that are both true and also may hold fallacy in the attempt to paint hope and comfort in a time in the world which is very unknown.

June 30, 2020 / *Swaying / Eyes*

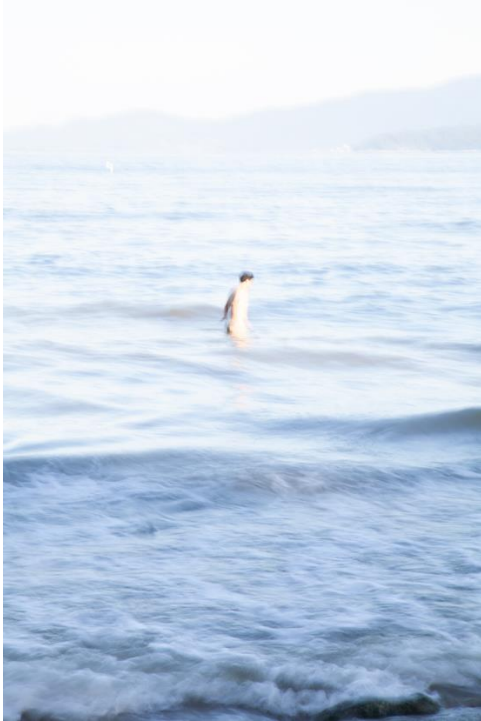


Photo 7. Swaying



Photo 8. Eyes

In the morning I woke up from a dream that was all in hues of blue. I dream a lot and before the pandemic started I was having acupuncture to quiet my dreams as I often had very visual nightmares and sleep paralysis.

This dream that I woke up from was serene and quiet and melancholic. There was a loneliness in the dream and I kept coming back to a visual of a person in the ocean moving their body with the movement of the waves as if their body was the same consistency of the moving water. This figure in my dream was swimming slowly for long stretches of time out into the ocean in a similar way that my grandfather used to, slowly and methodically swimming out into the open ocean. I also dreamt of a horse that used to roam around a field I once lived near in a small town in Northern BC. I walked up to this horse in my dream and its eyes were like the sky. These two moments settled into my thoughts after I woke up. I think dreams are reflective of how we are feeling or processing emotions we might not have registered yet like a longing for something that has come and gone.

The study of dreams often draws one to Freud and his assertions of dreams being the unconscious brain speaking out.² The brain is strange in the way that it can harbour emotions or experiences and contain them sometimes far below the surface, inaccessible to even our own selves.

I keep coming back to this visual pairing of the horse and the swimmer and I decide to construct these images as a way to externalize this dream. I approach these photographs through a surrealist perspective and work to depict images that suspends reality and depict the unconscious mind. In *On Photography*, Susan Sontag writes how “*surrealism lies at the heart of the photographic enterprise: in the very creation of a duplicate world, of a reality in the second degree, narrower but more dramatic than the one perceived by natural vision*” (52). I am interested in this idea of a duplicated world, and how the dream world and the real world have an opportunity to collide in photographic form. I think back to my previous entry about, “world-making,” and I see how this theme of producing alternative ways of being in the world is a thread throughout much of my work. Artist Carolyn Lefley and art historian Peter Smith explain the important relationship between photography and Surrealists and the unique difference that photography produced by bringing in elements of the ‘real’ into surrealist imagery. Lefley and Smith write:

Photography was an important vehicle for the Surrealists who experimented with the medium. They were captivated by the strange ambiguity of photographs that are both ‘fact’ and image at the same time. This duality makes them different to other pictures that are mediated by the hand because the photograph is mechanically produced: it takes the viewer back to the object in a uniquely original way of picturing the world. (120)

The photos I took, *Swaying* and *Eyes*, reflect both the object of the image as a marker of reality and the manipulation of the image as a marker of a surrealist approach. The images work to depict both the seen and unseeable and reflects a similar relationship to the depiction of the conscious and unconscious mind. When I was training to become an art therapist I studied how externalizing dreams, specifically dreams that are tied to an emotion can be a vehicle for discovering ways in which a person may be reacting to a stressor without realizing it. Externalizing these images from dreams

² Freud wrote the book, “The Interpretations of Dreams,” (1899) and claimed that dreams held symbols of our unconscious desires and that dreams could be understood to hold meaning.

reflects to me the processing of this time that feels untethered and unknown, blending forms that are familiar and also strange.

July 7, 2020 / To Look



Photo 9. To Look

I often see people in their homes through my window, making dinner, reading, having a friend over. It is different during this time, as so many people are home all the time. Little messages pop up on my neighbours' windows expressing support for front line workers. Sometimes I can hear neighbours talk across balconies and other times people yelling, even throwing things out their windows onto the ground below.

From my desk I could see a woman in the neighbouring apartment who had been pacing in her room. She did this for some time and then moved out of my vision. Later on that same day, I saw her again, sitting in a chair and then up again, pacing back and forth. I wonder what is making her pace, her anxious movement displayed in the window. The following day her blinds were down, and no lights were on for a few days until she was back again and I could see her pacing again in her room. I often think about this woman and wonder what her thoughts were that made sitting still too unbearable. I think about all of the people in their homes, having moments like this.

I suppose it is voyeuristic of me, but I think it is a mutually exchangeable relationship. Our apartments face each other, so she sees me too, "voyeurism can be seen as that moment when the public/private boundary is instituted within the construction of subjective experience, creating across the visual field the separate identities of public citizen and private person," (Frosh 49). In this exchange, both of us

take on the role of a public citizen or private person at different times, we observe from a distance small snippets of each other's lives.

I created an image that spoke to this experience of watching, of witnessing another's life from a distance, that resonated with my own experience in watching outwardly from my apartment. I went to a nearby park and saw a man photographing from afar a couple who were having wedding photos taken. I watched him watching them, photographing them from above while I photographed him from below, marking the exchanges we each have of being the public citizen and also the private person.

I am intrigued by the stories we subjectively create about people we may see but have never actually spoken with. In photography, voyeuristic looking is a consistent construct in structuring how we look and consume images. To look versus to be a voyeur is a subtle difference, art critic and curator, Michael Rush states that "it is a short leap from looking (fixing one's gaze upon another) to voyeurism (taking delight in extended gazing) to spying (surreptitiously studying the actions of another)" (Salked 123). I think about the voyeuristic extended gaze that Rush describes and how being a photographer often requires this gaze. To watch and notice moments with another person or place and through this gaze you train your eye to look for moments that are different from the others to make an interesting photograph. As I gazed at the man on the lookout I reflected this voyeuristic gaze just as I had with my neighbour in watching from a distance and imagining who they are and what their life might be like.

This image reminds me of the fictional assumptions and narratives we impart on strangers and how the camera can act as a tool and extension of watching another. I think about the woman I saw pacing and I wonder how she is doing. I've constructed ten different ideas about her life and her relationships. These glimpses into another's life can take on a sense of realness, but once we return to the photographic process, we are reminded that we are simply constructing a story and only grasping on to speculation and fiction. During the many days indoors I feel that we look outside of our homes for stories or connection, to feel part of something beyond ourselves.

July 14, 2020 / *Spotlight*



Photo 10. Spotlight

In the evening, Genta and I went to Queen Elizabeth Park and wandered around the gardens, the moon was bright, and it was nice to go out at night, even if we didn't go too far. As we walked around the park, there was a small group that has gathered around a lookout. Cameras and tripods were stationed towards the dark sky. Someone had a light that acted like a laser and cut through the night sky. They used this high powered light to point out where the comet Neowise was hurtling through the universe. This tiny dot that millions of miles away was rushing through outer space, glimpsing at our small planet as it traveled somewhere else. The comet reminds me of how small we are, floating in one galaxy unaware of so much beyond ourselves.

Watching a comet during a global pandemic inside a beautifully manicured garden in the city at night felt like a strange reality to be living in. I considered how this moment felt like the start of a science fiction novel. How quickly in those movies and novels the world changes in one day and everything is different and we interact and relate to the world around us in new ways.

The following day I wanted to construct an image that spoke to this sense of a strange nature, one that exhibits how changes take place beyond our control. I walked into a mundane space on the side of a road with overgrown bushes and grass. I imagined that sense of an otherworldly experience I had in the park. I manipulated the photograph to depict an unnatural light that reminded me of the laser the night before and also referenced the light so often depicted in science fiction imagery. A beam of light from above, the presence of the unknown suddenly arriving. Art critic Andrew Frost writes how “science fiction operates as a language of realism. In both its literary and filmic manifestations, narratives are framed by an effaced mimesis where effects, visual or textual, are rendered in the context of the believable, the everyday” (18). There is a strange comfort in utilizing a science fiction approach that doesn’t abandon the current reality but instead brings aspects of it with us into a new envisioning of an altered reality. Amelia Barikin, previously mentioned for her writing on “making-worlds,” writes that “working through overlaps between fiction and non-fiction, the real and the imagined, science fiction is here valued for its capacity to construct alternate realities out of the very stuff from which the present is made” (11). This centering on the realities of our world to expose that which feels like science fiction reveals the thin line of how we can slip between the known and the unknown and that in our realities the possibilities of a turn towards a science fiction type experience is already present exposing themselves in moments like I experienced in the park.

July 29, 2020 / *Night Swim*



Photo 11. Night Swim

I walked to the ocean at night with my camera. The moon was bright and there were bioluminescence in the water. I wanted to try and photograph the hues of green that spread through the water when I threw a rock off of a small dock. It is like magic to witness the sudden illumination of the water brought on by tiny organisms reacting to oxygen. I steadied my camera and tried to capture this glowing light but the light comes and goes too quickly to capture it. I keep photographing the ocean in hopes that I might be able to manipulate the photograph later and reveal the light. Eventually I left my camera on the shore and swam in the water watching as my arms were followed by a trail of light. I opened my eyes under water and saw the glowing hues contrasting the darkness of the water. I am reminded of how in times of upheaval there can still be joy, that we don't live in a dichotomy but instead a space that is constantly in flux and multifaceted with dynamic layers of happenings taking place all at once. Some happenings we can name and point to and others go unnoticed yet still inform how we are in the world.

When I went home I uploaded my photographs and began to digitally manipulate the photos I took, pushing their exposure, hoping to find a hint of the bioluminescence appearing. The subtle hues don't show up but in the corner of one image I catch a figure that I hadn't noticed when I shot the photo. A person is swimming and their shadow is elongated by the light of the moon as they swim out into the ocean. The image is a snapshot of a moment captured that I wasn't even aware of. I am reminded of the 1980s film *Blow-up* in which a photographer accidentally photographs a murder scene in a park and only becomes aware of it after enlarging the image. In this film directed by Michelangelo Antonioni the photographic medium takes on its own character as a driver of the story, as though the photographer is at the whim of the photograph (Wendorf). I am intrigued by the innate complexity that a photograph can hold in what it can capture and how the photographic image can reveal so much more than what the eye initially witnesses. In the essay, "Short History of Photography," Walter Benjamin writes that

"it is impossible to say anything about that fraction of a second when a person starts to walk. Photography with its various aids (lenses, enlargements) can reveal this moment. Photography makes aware for the first time the optical unconscious,³ just as psychoanalysis discloses the instinctual unconscious" (7). There is a sense of magic in the ability of the camera to reveal the unseen.

As I contemplated this ability of capturing what is often beyond our own eyes capacity I focused on the photograph of the swimmer. Her shadow oddly elongated by the low hanging moon and the grainy quality produced through pushing the exposure, I enjoyed how the image was a snapshot, photographed without my knowing. I cropped the photo and made the swimmer the focus of the image celebrating the documentation of the unseen.

³ The *Optical Unconscious* is described as a " term which he coined [Walter Benjamin] in 1931 to capture the realm of the unseen that photography introduced as well as the medium's unsung role in allowing us to glimpse the expansive terrain of the human imaginary" (Toronto Photography Seminar par 3)

August 1, 2020 / Road Trip



Photo 12. Road Trip

Genta and I went camping beside a lake in the Okanogan. Apricot and plum orchards carpeted the sloping hills, it was really beautiful. The first night we were there, it poured rain, and there was thunder and lightning right above us. Everything was illuminated for a split second and then darkness. When the lightning flashed, we asked each other, "did you see that?" The lightening came and went so quickly it was hard to confirm if we saw the light or imagined it.

While driving back to Vancouver, I took photographs out of my window of quickly moving landscapes that hugged along the highway. I imagined these places illuminated by the previous night's lighting. An unreal light touching down only for a moment like a dream you instantly forget once you wake up. When I got home, I knew I wanted to use one of the photos I took out of my window and construct a landscape caught in that moment of flash, depicting a view we could never typically linger on. The image's qualities reflect a sublime landscape, both real in its documentation and unreal in its presentation, depicting a landscape beyond the natural bounds of our own world.

Theorist Edmund Burke⁴ referred to the sublime as having power to provoke the strongest emotions we are capable of feeling (Brady 51). Philosopher Moses

⁴ Edmund Burke wrote, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757). His writing explored how the sublime can be a conflicting sensations such as pleasure and terror (Tate).

Mendelssohn related to the sublime through a physical understanding stating that the sublime “causes a sweet shudder, dizziness’ and a trembling sensation, where the awe is almost comparable to a lightning bolt which blinds us in one moment and disappears the next” (Brady 51). This description reminded me of experiencing the flash lightening inside the tent. A moment of excitement and beauty and also one of unease and alarm.

This image, *Road Trip*, takes on a sublime construction of light, creating beauty in the mundane and also exemplifying a natural space made unnatural. I wanted the “normalcy” of looking at a landscape to be disrupted as the constructed light signals that things are not as they should be. The sublime is known to both hold an oscillating experience of satisfaction and dread (Brady 52). In this image I hope to provoke a relation with the photograph that is one of beauty and one of fear, reflective of not only the lightning storm but also of the times we are in, when a displacement of the norm is now expected.

September 12, 2020 / *Moths*



Photo 13. Moths

The smoke was thick in the air from forest fires to the north and south of us. The sun was bright red, and the mountains had disappeared. Vancouver was rated at one of the worst air quality levels in the world that day. I probably should have stayed inside,

that is what was advised, but instead, I kayaked up an inlet outside of Vancouver in the grey haze. As I paddled up the inlet, thousands of moths were floating on the surface of the water. I pulled up my paddle as it moved through a chalky whiteness of wings. I had never seen anything like this, the dark water continuously speckled by the moths, and now and then there was a tiny ripple created by a moth fluttering before it died. There has been a huge outbreak of moths in the lower mainland and it was being called a "mothapocalypse," this happens about every eleven to fifteen years. It was an eerie feeling on the water and looked like a dystopic landscape. This sense of foreboding in the landscape was reflective of so much of the past few months. It was the first time since the pandemic started that I was entirely out of service and I turned my phone off for the first time in months. For so long I had felt entirely consumed in reading news and looking at videos and photographs of everything happening in the world. The trip is five hours one way and I am surprised by where my mind goes in the silence. Imagery comes to my mind as though without the constant consumption of news distracting me there is more space to really think about what has been seen, what has happened over the past months.

There has been a steady stream of imagery of extreme violence from police, imagery of families marching in the streets in states of grief, imagery of mass graves built to accommodate the sudden influx of people dying from COVID who no one claimed. Imagery is powerful in the way that it marks the world and those that witness it. Art historian Hong Kal writes that "while people encounter catastrophic events in different contexts and positions, most vicarious encountering is mediated through images, especially in the era of greater technological sophistication" (98). I wonder how this form of secondary witnessing informs how people relate to the world around them. I am drawn to Kyo Maclear's perspective written in her book, *Beclouded Visions : Hiroshima-Nagasaki and the Art of Witness*, that explores witnessing in relation to trauma. She asserts that viewer has a responsibility to go beyond simply looking. Maclear writes,

Witnessing is the will to push at the limits of our looking. Finding where the visible cheats us of knowledge and memory is intrinsic to the act of meeting absent worlds. We are surrounded by the vapor of the unseen, the outstanding claims of the dead, the ghosts of histories that have been excluded from contemporary society. Thus, witnessing involves endless imagination. It takes time and foresight; it requires an insistent gaze that can both refuse finality and exceed evidentiary necessity. (75)

This description of witnessing asks one to fully engage in what we are consuming and to form an evolving relationship to the images that we see that moves beyond simply looking. In saying this, I also recognize the immense privilege in being able to witness rather than having the lived experience that many of these images in the news are documenting.

The smoke is so thick while we are paddling that we can't see very far ahead of us, but we keep going into what resembles an abyss. I think about how this moment of being in the thick of the smoke surrounded by these moths is also a witnessing of a changing world, one where forest fire smoke blocks out the sun each year and we hope for rain and relief. As we reach our destination nightfall soon comes and in the darkness we can hear the trees swaying in the wind and a little creek and birds, but you can't see the stars because of the smoke. When the darkness set in I took a photograph of some of the floating moths, the darkness suspends them so the viewer might assume they are flying rather than dead. While contemplating witnessing as I paddled up the inlet I knew I wanted to make a photo which documented what I witnessed that day and also worked as a marker of the feelings and sense of foreboding I had been having through the process of both witnessing and looking at images of so much pain.

Swaying is a marker of how I experienced different moments and thoughts throughout this continued pandemic. The final photographic work was presented together on one wall in different formal qualities. Some photographs are framed or mounted while others are pinned to the wall. Some images are printed on archival paper and some are printed on cheap drafting paper. The purpose of these different printing techniques is a way to reference my diaristic process in that it oscillates between the informal format of a diary and the formal inclusion of photographic theory. The images sit in constellation with each other to depict to the viewer the entirety of the stories I write about in the diary. Although the diary is linear the wall allows for a new format of viewing, one that holds space for witnessing. These disparate images form new meanings that ask the viewer to interpret these images together, finding ways of relating both the familiar and strange within the varying photographs. One image on its own couldn't hold the meaning of the work in the same way that they do together. Artistic Director at Camera Austria, Reinhard Braun, wrote about artist Shirana Shahbazi's exhibition who

presented work in a similar format and spoke about how when the images are presented in this way the works are almost in collaboration with each other, they coalesce creating new meanings resulting from their togetherness. I am drawn to explore these possibilities of the images collaborating with each other to take on new meanings when they are viewed collectively rather than separately. I have always been drawn to the work and perspective of one of my favourite photographers Rinko Kawauchi who writes that, “life is not made up of fragmented events but instead is one of continuous moment,” (Andia). In having the images collectively presented together I hope to lean into the idea that the processing of the pandemic is not done through one image but is made up of these continuous moments that reshape how we are and how we live and process this time.

As I write this now, numbers of COVID infections are continuing to rise here, and the future, like always, is still very much unknown. This diaristic process combined with my photographic work has acted as a vehicle to externalize my own processing of these changes and the theoretical aspects speak to how I come to relate and understand this changing world. Atsuko Sakaki, writes about the diary as being in relationship with the camera. Sakaki writes, “the act of diary-keeping – both quotidian and private, banal and secretive – is itself comparable to photography. ‘Up close and personal’, the diary registers what might escape one’s consciousness as one lives one’s life – just as the camera can restore what the naked eye cannot register instantaneously, for use at a later (any) time” (390). This relationship between the diary and the photograph allows me to explore what can’t always be seen. This process has fostered space for me to ‘make-worlds,’ and speak to the strange, the beautiful, the fearful and mundane that is present. The world is forever in flux and as we collectively navigate this pandemic we form new pathways of processing and coming to understand this changing world.

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Appendix A.

Looking and Being: Knowing Land Through Photography

Introduction

“The camera is not a historical witness to the event, nor is the photographer its heroic interpreter; but through the site and what remains of the encounter a record is produced” (Neath 311).

This paper works to explore how photographic landscapes of sites of contamination take on agency as a mode of storytelling to the viewer; through what we see and do not see, we come to know the world differently. The role of photography is one steeped in political and social complexities. Photographs hold both a truth and a fallacy in their depiction of the ‘real,’ holding an objective and subjective power. When referring to the paradoxes held in photography, theorist Roland Barthes states that “the photograph belongs to that class of laminated objects whose two leaves cannot be separated without destroying them both: the windowpane and the landscape, and why not: Good and Evil, desire and its object: dualities we can conceive but not perceive”(6). This exploration of dualities is necessary to this paper as artists working within the landscape as sites of contamination confront both the visible and invisible and the paradox between objective and subjective. Often the visual landscape does not depict the visual mark of contamination, yet it is in the land, present, but often unseen. The artists I will be focusing on throughout this paper include Susan Schuppli, Teresa Montoya and Masato Seto. Their photographs speak to the landscape’s retelling of the story of contamination, morphing into familiar and unfamiliar forms as time moves forward, yet, memories stay housed in the land. This paper will be exploring the role of research in Schuppli and Montoya’s work and how their presented data informs the viewer beyond what is visually present. Also, photographic materiality is discussed in its relation to being a medium that holds discomfort in its reveal of traumatic realities. This paper will address the viewer as witness and the complication of seeing what is unseeable in contaminated sites. History remains in places, sometimes physically present and other times undetectable to the human eye. It becomes a choice of the artist to expose a history that may not be visibly accessible and of the viewer to engage

with the work beyond what might be visually present. The photograph forms a union with research that moves beyond only visual language and includes a process that widens the possibilities of engaging with a photographic landscape.

The land holds so many different meanings for people and cultures throughout the world; there is a complex and diverse understanding of land, meaning and knowledge as well as connection to the land that cannot and should not be generalized. This paper is formed from research gathered by artists working within similar themes that situates the landscape as an agent of storytelling, but in no way can this paper speak to the multitude of important and diverse ways that land is related to throughout the world.

Sites of Contamination and Research

The study of land and contamination through artistic means creates a parallel union between the artists and the land. Land is so intimately tied to history and the current socio-political climate, to produce work about the land an artist grapples with how these multitudes of histories and perhaps their personhood, may become present in their work. The process of working within landscapes, specifically those that are contaminated, often is formed through a dedicated research process that addresses both objective facts and subjective experiences, there is a presence of both an inner and outer relation. Artist and author Sandra Semchuk writes about this relationship that forms when one interacts within a landscape of historical importance and meaning. Semchuk writes, “we are immersed in dialogue with two landscapes, an inner and an outer. It is within our silent conversations with the world that memories are created, and stories connect us to place, to questions that give us direction, self-recognition, and recognition of others” (xxx). Work in this field can become a vehicle for furthering dialogue and visibility of erased or minimized stories and histories contained in landscapes. Author Michaela Schäuble writes how a “historical landscape is, ‘both material and meaning’ and defined through phenomenological interaction and experience; it is shaped by visible historical interpretations as well as by meanings and readings related to them” (27). Schäuble examines how landscapes related to trauma are held in a place of memory to be passed down and shared. Artwork created about sites of contamination support the process of remembering through image-making and

research to a broader audience who comes to know the particular landscape with greater depth, not only concerning the land but also those affected.

Many artists working within these fields utilize research as a way to inform their practice and the viewer. Susan Schuppli and Teresa Montoya are artists and researchers working within themes of contamination of landscapes and the resulting socio-political implications. Their work utilizes data as a medium that expands beyond the visual realm and allows the viewer to see more than what is visually depicted — much of the research collected is from archives, reporting, and narrative accounts. The research is primarily objective and factual accounts that come into concert with the artist's practice and subjective process, creating art informed by their data. Each artist utilizes research as a guiding principle to the creation of their works and as a tool to share stories beyond what is visually present, weaving in other mediums to expand the story beyond solely what the viewer can see.

Susan Schuppli

Susan Schuppli is an artist, author, professor and forensic architect⁵. Her work spans across a multi-disciplinary approach that speaks to a wide-ranging area of study related to land and socio-political issues, including sites of contamination, climate change, and investigations of human rights issues. *Nature Represents Itself* (2018) is a multi-disciplinary piece created by Schuppli that confronts the British Petroleum (BP) Deepwater Horizon oil spill in 2010. Included in this piece is a photograph composed by a group called Public Lab which was formed after BP made it illegal to document the spill (see fig.1). The image is made by citizens who worked to document the spill with homemade satellite imaging using kites and balloons connected to digital cameras to compile thousands of images that would be stitched together to map the extent of the spill (Wall Text). The photograph reveals some of the extent of the spill from an aerial perspective. The view of the photograph reveals what is present yet attempted to be unseeable through BP. This photograph reveals the presence of contamination, and through the research included within this piece expands the viewer's perception of what

⁵ Forensic Architecture, "undertake[s] advanced spatial and media investigations into cases of human rights violations, with and on behalf of communities affected by political violence, human rights organizations, international prosecutors, environmental justice groups, and media organizations".(Forensic Architecture)

they are witnessing. *Nature Represents Itself* also includes video and simulated animation work along with an audio recording of a law-suit against BP initiated by Ecuador on behalf of Pacha Mama⁶ (“Spill” Belkin). This piece speaks to the multi-disciplinary approach to research practices that utilize imagery and photography to depict both a real and constructed reality that moves beyond one-dimensional viewing.

Schuppli’s work *Trace Evidence* (2016) is an example of revealing imagery of contaminated spaces that shows the unseeable. An image of the ocean situated along the western coast of Vancouver Island (see fig. 2.0) is documented by a gamma camera depicting the traces of nuclear waste present in the landscape. Through accompanying research, it is revealed that this site is monitored for the presence of nuclear waste. Since the 2011 Fukushima nuclear meltdown, nuclear waste has been tracked all the way to the west coast of Vancouver Island (“Tracing Liquid Evidence” Schuppli). Schuppli writes how the waste travels “the 7,600 kilometre, five-year journey of Caesium-137 from Fukushima-Daiichi through the waters of the Pacific Ocean to the west coast of Vancouver Island. Despite its radical and covert nature, the unique signature and behaviour of radioactive isotopes allows its lethal traces to be tracked directly back to their source,” (“Tracing Liquid Evidence” Schuppli). This work disrupts the landscape and makes visible the invisible, allowing the viewer to learn that the landscape holds more than what is visually depicted. Her disruption of an expected landscape depicts an approach to witnessing that asks the viewer to engage in the imagery through both research and visual means. The photographs tell a story beyond what the eye can see. In her work, nature takes an active role in the retelling of histories and traumas that have taken place in and on the land.

⁶ “the legal system [of Bolivia and Ecuador] acknowledges that nature, known as Pachamama in the Quichua and Aimara indigenous languages, has rights” (Berros).



Fig. 1.0. Photograph from *Nature Represents Itself*. (2018). Susan Schuppli.
Photo by Kyle Knoll. New York.
www.susanschuppli.com/exhibition/naturerepresentsitself/



Fig. 2.0. Still taken *Trace Evidence* (2016) Preview. Susan Schuppli.
www.vimeo.com/194153862

Theresa Montoya

Theresa Montoya is a multi-disciplinary artist whose work focuses on land and issues related to contamination and how that connects to Indigenous territories and colonization. Montoya's "research and media production focuses on legacies of environmental contamination and settler colonialism in relation to contemporary issues of tribal jurisdiction and regulatory politics in the Indigenous Southwest." ("Teresa Montoya" Belkin). *Yellow Water* (2016) is a multi-disciplinary piece that combines both photography and research-based tactics such as contaminated water samplings (see fig. 3.0) to expand the reading of her work.



Fig.3.0. Contaminated Water, *Yellow Water* (2016). Exhibition: *Spill*. Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery. Theresa Montoya. Photo by: Hannah Campbell

Yellow Water documents the trail of contaminated mining waste that spilled in 2015 from the Gold King Mine Spill. Montoya followed the path of the spill traversing from Silverton, Colorado to Shiprock, New Mexico, documenting the land, people and communities affected by the mining waste (Montoya). Montoya writes, "the 2015 spill had discharged more than three million gallons of acidic mine waste ... Through my photographic journey, I make explicit the enduring presence of toxicity across multiple landscapes and territories. Sometimes it appears beautiful, other times haunting" (Montoya). Montoya's work holds a political and social charge that is uniquely exhibited through her photographic work, which depicts a photojournalistic style. The photographs

read like a documentary narrative creating space for the viewer to look directly at what the artist sees (see fig. 4.0).



Fig 4.0. Photograph from *Yellow Water* (2016). Teresa Montoya. www.teresamontoya.square-space.com/yellowwater

Not only are the images an investigation of what has taken place in the past, but also how the mining spill continues to affect people today. Her photographic and science-based research is woven together to inform the viewer of what they see and what they cannot see. The viewer looks at a photograph of a river, which seems familiar, yet the water samples shown in the exhibition tell us what is present. Again, similarly to Schuppli, the images take on new meaning when this information is present. This data acts as a key in unlocking what we cannot see; our brains must suspend the conflict between what we witness as possibly a serene river and knowing the water may be toxic. Montoya seamlessly includes the link to colonization and the land, exposing the often-erased connections between extractive industries and colonization that continues today.

The Photograph and Visibility

The photographic landscape can reveal or tell a story in ways that are different from other mediums. The photograph, whether in contemporary arts or within documentary based practices, unless profoundly altered, can hold truth within the image. The photograph is most often created by an interaction between the sensor or film and light; there is an exchange between the camera and the world. Susan Sontag writes about this physicality:

Photographs had the advantage of uniting two contradictory features. Their credentials of objectivity were in-built. Yet they always had, necessarily, a point of view. They were a record of the real - incontrovertible, as no verbal account, however impartial, could be- since a machine was doing the recording. And they bore witness to the real - since a person had been there to take them (26).

A photograph reflects a reality that we cannot escape. Anthropologist Michael Taussig reflected on this when he described how he was struck by a drawing in the New York Times that depicted a decapitated head of a Maori person whose skull had been kept since 1875 in a museum in France. The museum prohibited photographs of the skull but has allowed drawing depictions (Taussig). Taussig questions, “why is the drawing okay but not a photograph? For certainly, the photograph of the drawing is not only okay but very awful,” (11). The drawing acts like an attempted barrier to the reality of continued acts of colonization today. The photograph is deemed too ‘real’ and possibly too disturbing in its reflection of reality. Taussig continues his exploration of this subject and asks, “could it be that the photograph is implicitly assumed to be a magical way of capturing the spirit of the dead, while the drawing is understood to be but a timid approximation offering no more than a squint-eyed view such that, unlike the photograph, it cannot so easily be appropriated for sympathetic magic?” (13). The photograph acts as an object that holds the means of representation and carries a closeness to the real that unfolds the unique ability of photography to connect to a bodily experience of witnessing and affect. In this understanding, the photograph holds agency as a physical object and can act as a reminder of the past.

Artists Masato Seto creates stark and affective photographic landscapes. Seto’s photo-graphic series, *Cesium* (2012) depicts photographs of Fukushima, one year after

the devastating nuclear meltdown in 2011. The landscapes are sites of nuclear contamination. Seto disrupts the realness of the photographs by printing them in the negative form, revealing a world that is both familiar and strange, (see fig. 5.0). The 'truth' of the landscapes photographed is present and also disrupted in how the eye reads darkness and lightness and vice versa in a negative photograph.

This distortion creates space between the viewer as witness to an image depicted in reality and instead offers the viewer to experience the landscape photographed through a more subjective lens, offering an expansion of witnessing both visually and through an affective means. This work speaks to the horrors and devastation of such contamination, particularly through Seto because he grew up and his parents live in the Fukushima prefecture. Through his depiction of landscapes there is a personal choice in his photographing of the land that reflects the pain and horror still present. This disruption of the photographic landscape reveals that the viewers are witnessing something present, yet unseeable.



Fig. 5.0. A photograph from *Cesium* (2012), Masato Seto. PRI. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. www.pri.org/file/07-seto-masatowebjpg

The landscape may remain to resemble a familiar place, even moments of serene beauty, yet, it is what we cannot see that is held in the air or in the ground that informs the viewer. The ground holds stories of both reality and remembering, past and present. Anthropologist Tim Ingold speaks about the ground as a surface of the world, “what for Kant was a stage became, for Marx, a production platform, not merely furnished but materially transformed through human activity...an interface between the mental and the material where the sheer physicality of the world comes hard up against the creativity of human endeavour” (123). Ingold’s perception of the ground as a space of agency and a site of human and non-human interaction in the world reflects Seto’s work as a photographic focus of the land as a keeper of the trauma-induced in 2011. The ground holds meaning and presence within this project. Seto’s work moves the images outside of a serene landscape and, instead, works to depict the presence of contamination both there and not there. Seto wrote about his work and stated how, “to capture that invisible horror on camera, I reached out to the nature of Fukushima—its mountain forests, rivers, and fields. I started photographing in an attempt to visualize the cesium that must be clinging to things everywhere, the horrific, terrifying things, but now I feel that I’ve seen something that should never have been seen” (Seto). In his depiction of such horror, the viewer is asked to share in the burden of witnessing, to see what he also saw.

The artists discussed in this paper reflect a theme of questioning the visible and the invisible. When considering sites of contamination, pictures of catastrophe and chaos may come to mind. How do we reconcile a photograph of a landscape that is contaminated yet serene? It is in this lack of visibility where curiosities of the complexities of witnessing can evolve. How does the reading of a landscape change once we know it is contaminated, or does it change? Is it the research-based component that is vital in properly seeing a photograph? Author and professor Ryan Bishop discusses the notion of invisibility and writes how:

There are essentially two types of invisibility: one would be the invisible that can be rendered visible through technological interventions ... This contingent invisibility operates with regard to the empirical realm of the visible, and thus is potentially visible. As such, this domain of visibility opens itself up to a range of representational manipulations and constitutes the visible and invisible as a continuum: vision and its horizon. The other kind of invisibility is of a more radical stripe for it is that which can

never be rendered visible, the structural necessity of invisibility by which visibility is possible at all. (583)

From this understanding, the invisibility of some forms of contamination is what may drive some artists to work towards making the invisible visible. The work moves outside of the structures of reality and informs the viewer to see more than what is visible, to feel affected by a place that holds a disruption to its ecological balance that is dangerous and harmful both to the land and its inhabitants. To see and not see can be on a scale and is not definitive but instead, a process informed by each individual and their relationship to the land. The land acts as an agent in this seeing or unseeing, Schäuble writes that “the land does not allow its inhabitants to forget and is in turn also not allowed to forget as the people of the region persistently charge the territory with commemorative meaning.” (52). The land holds agency and a reciprocal relationship of remembrance between its materiality and the inhabitants. When the land is photographed and shared, does this then expand the possibilities of charging the land with commemorative meaning? In this, there is a unique unfolding of the relationship between the land and both the photographer and the viewer. As though dialogue and connection bloom through the visual relationship offered by the photograph. We seek to see everything, and in that seeking, we invest in the knowing of a place which further adds to the web of interaction within the world, with a photograph, with a landscape.

Viewer/Witness

The photograph can reveal the familiar and the strange and document moments that are outside of many people’s experiences. Freezing moments that can document trauma, contamination or both, of which most people would never choose to experience but sometimes choose to look and see, to become a witness distantly, if we can call it that. Taussig explores the notion of the witness and writes that “to witness is not just to have your eyes open at the right spot at the right time ... To witness, as opposed to see, is to be implicated in a process of judgment— even if the court before which one is called to bear witness is (how shall I put this?) imaginary,” (71). In this sense Taussig defines a difference between simply seeing versus witnessing. Where to become a witness requires an exchange that goes beyond the visual and requires an engagement of thought which places oneself into the imagery. Meaning the witness enacts their own relationship to the image informed through their personhood. A photograph may hold a

multitude of different meanings through a witnesses subjective relation, even when informed by objective research.

Susan Schuppli developed the term, “material witness.” In relation to forensic architecture; it is described as, “an exploration of the evidential role of matter as both registering external events as well as exposing the practices and procedures that enable such matter to bear witness” (“Material Witness” Schuppli). The idea of “material witnessing” places agency within the non-human and in the land that holds remembrance of history and experience. When referring to her piece *Nature Represents Itself*, Schuppli stated in an interview that the title reflected the possibility of the land having agency in representing its own interests (Brown). This sense of non-human witnessing furthers the idea and possibility of the agency of land as a storyteller and holder of histories.

Conclusion

The photographic landscape is one that holds political, social and environmental weight. Schuppli, Montoya, and Seto work in unique and similar ways to reveal the unseeable through their disruption of the photograph either literally as seen in Schuppli and Seto’s work altering the landscape to reveal that things are not as they seem, or like Montoya whose images form a narrative that reveal the experience of sites of contamination. The photograph holds power in its materiality and its relationship to depicting the ‘real.’ Through research practices, work can become multi-disciplinary and expand the experience of witnessing what is visually present in the artist’s work. The duality of photography becomes present in this paper as the play between research and artistic creation reveals the possibility of both holding and suspending truths. This work is political and charged both through objective and subjective means and in that complex web, is the in- visible, that which cannot be named, the sensorial affective quality that a photograph can hold.

Perhaps it is what Roland Barthes describes as punctum, “a photograph’s punctum is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)” (27). We are pricked and changed by images that place us in the world outside of ourselves and make us consider how we interact and see the world around us. Photographic work that steps both into the real and fictional moves the viewer into the possibilities of the

unknown and asks the viewer to engage, to witness. The witness can be both the viewer who chooses to engage beyond simply seeing and also the land which holds memories both in the literal way of evidence and also as sites of remembrance.

Through human and non-human interaction with sites of contamination we remember, we tell stories, we make art and create research that marks history for future generations to know also. The photograph holds meaning beyond an image and instead lives in the home of our psyches reminding us of that place, or that mountain, or of a river that flows today but still is contaminated. Through photographic work, we can come to know and interact with land beyond what is visually present, seeing the unseeable through a collaborative means between photography and the land.

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