



FUSION JOURNAL ISSUE 10

LAND DIALOGUES: Interdisciplinary research in dialogue with land

The Analogue: Analogue Photography as an Analogy for Earth Processes

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Historically, photography has been used as a tool to understand the world, shaping cultural perception of all that it captures. It is landscape photography that frames and constructs our view — or our projection — of nature. Human positionality is often about separation and the primacy of human culture, despite the fact that humans are part of nature. Our perception of non-human nature is filtered through photographic representations that reinforce this primacy of human agency. Could a new vision of “landscape” emerge from photography if it is thought of as a material — as matter — rather than a representational medium and a discipline?

This paper proposes to use analogue photography as an analogy for earth processes in order to conceptually collapse the space between photo-media and nature. I use the term “analogue” to refer to non-digital, chemically-based photographic processes that use compounds such as: silver iodide (calotype), silver halide (silver-gelatine, chromogenic prints), silver nitrate and mercury (daguerreotype, wet-plate collodion), and ammonium iron citrate and potassium ferricyanide (cyanotype). Processes where the image is latent, or invisible, until it undergoes a chemical development.

Exposing the inherent analogues between this photography and geophysical systems — surface, time, interaction, minerals, transformation — generates new ways to know photography. These correspondences can be seen as a distinct way to examine photography’s crucial role in how we understand the natural environment. I use the term “earth processes” to emphasise the notion of process - either the action of becoming or the activity of entropy — as this is also a primary behaviour of photography. I see the geophysical systems — Earth’s interacting physical, biological, and chemical processes — as corresponding to a particular vision of photography. Ultimately, this proposal works against the conceptual and pictorial conventions of landscape photography, yet capitalises on the fact that photography is seen as a kind of knowledge.

ANALOGY x 2

In *The Miracle of Analogy: Or the History of Photography, Part 1*, Kaja Silverman contends that, “Photography is also an ontological calling card: it helps us to see that each of us is a node in a vast constellation of analogies” (11). Silverman ascribes the term “analogy” to “Being” (with a capital B), or “the world” where everything carries “the same ontological weight” (11). For her, photography “receives” the world (11). It is not a copy or an index attributed to a technology, but a liquid development where the world images itself (12).

To make her case, Silverman draws from the writings of the most well-known names in the inception of photography, Louis Jacques Mandé Daguerre and William Henry Fox Talbot, to describe photography as the means in which the world reveals itself, beyond human determination. Daguerre, who developed the daguerreotype process with Nicéphore Niépce — a singular photographic image on a reflective, polished metal surface — wrote that: “The daguerreotype is not merely an instrument which serves to draw Nature... it is a chemical and physical process which gives her the power to reproduce herself” (qtd in Silverman 26). This notion that photography is a way for the world to image itself is further emphasised by the words of Talbot, who developed the calotype process — a paper negative that could be waxed in order to reproduce positive images from the original. In “Photogenic Drawing,” Talbot states: “It is not the artist who makes the picture, but the picture which makes *itself*” (emphasis his) (qtd in Silverman 10).

I am using Silverman’s account of analogy, which includes acknowledging the agency of the world in the production of photographic images, but I am also maintaining the notion of analogy as a correspondence. This research indicates that analogue photography — its processes and materiality — has actual correspondences to the functions of geophysical systems.

Considering these early responses to the activity and material of photography, I’ve taken the photographic work of three contemporary artists, discussed in the following sections, to examine this relationship between photography and earth processes.

The artists that I discuss have practices that, through their experimental nature, enlarge and make visible the analogous connections.

DISRUPTING THE FRAME

“Use of the frame as a device in landscape photography begs interrogation. In effect, a rectilinear scene is abstracted and presented as if it represents the actual experience of looking at - or being within - an environment.” - Liz Wells, *Land Matters* (43).

The frame in landscape photography is a device that constructs a point-of-view that suggests notions of authenticity and objectivity. It is an incredibly limited view, yet bears the impossible task of standing in for that environment. The repetition of photographic framing produces a template of codes and conventionalised meaning in which standards are established for how and what is photographed.

The photographic work of Letha Wilson eschews these pictorial conventions, in part through her disruption of the frame. Wilson creates sculptural pieces, melding photographs of geologic formations with concrete, a rock composite. In doing so, she connects what is represented through photographic imagery with the artwork's material composition. Physically, they interrupt the frame of 2-dimensional photography, opening it up into space and thereby drawing attention to the frame's existence. Wilson's artworks highlight a key aspect of photography — the stratification of materials, the layering of paper and substrates and emulsions that suspend the light sensitive materials. And, significantly, they emphasise the conditions of time and process that are inherent in photography. Process is a common word associated with photography. Used as a noun, it relates to different processing techniques — e.g. the wet-plate collodion process, the gum-bichromate process, etc. More importantly, the verb "process" — to carry out an action or series of actions to cause a change in condition — emphasises time and transformation.



Letha Wilson, Badlands Concrete Bend, 2015 | C-prints, concrete, emulsion transfer, aluminium frame | © Letha Wilson

The American earthworks artist, Robert Smithson, in his 1968 essay “A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Project,” spoke of the relationship between geology and art: “The strata of the Earth is a jumbled museum. Embedded in the sediment is a text that contains limits and boundaries which exceed the rational order, and social structures which confine art. In order to read the rocks we must become conscious of geologic time, and of the layers of prehistoric material that is entombed in Earth’s crust” (110). Wilson’s artworks are a composite of source photographs of geologic sites and concrete, this fusion compels the viewer to be mindful of geologic time. The instantaneous camera capture of the scene, morphing with rock composite’s association with vastly slow processes of aggregation and erosion, refers to a timescale that is both human — through the technology of the camera — and beyond human.

LIQUID INTELLIGENCE

Like Wilson’s sculptural photographs, the function of surface, time, chemical interaction, and transformation is also at play in Alison Rossiter’s photography. In her work, she takes expired B&W photographic paper and develops selected areas without exposing it with a negative or to the light of an enlarger. They do not represent an object in the world; rather, they are photographs of process and material. The creation of these works invoke the outdated terms “wet-darkroom” and “wet-printing” — Rossiter pours and pools liquid developer directly onto the surface, or dips the sheets into developer baths. The results are abstract forms displaying the characteristics of a chemical interaction and time’s effect on the paper. The process reveals the chemical shifts of photographic emulsion that have occurred as the boxes of paper sat in storage, forgotten, for dozens of year. Her procedures reactivate a material that, conventionally, would be viewed as unusable.



Alison Rossiter | From the series Landscapes | Defender

Argo, expired September 1911, processed 2014 | Unique Gelatin Silver Print | © Alison Rossiter,
Courtesy Yossi Milo Gallery, New York

Rossiter's work, through the forces of chemical interaction and time — and notably without exposure to light — conjures a primordial, subterranean process. It is not light-writing, the etymology of the word “photography,” but a writing of inky shadows. The essay, “Photography and Liquid Intelligence”, by photographic artist and theoretical writer Jeff Wall, provides an aqueous parallel to an aspect of analogue photography that Rossiter's work emphasises. Wall draws an analogy between liquid processes and prehistorical photography:

...water — symbolically — represents an archaism in photography... This archaism of water, of liquid chemicals, connects photography to the past, to time, in an important way. By calling water an "archaism" here I mean that it embodies a memory-trace of very ancient production-processes — of washing, bleaching, dissolving, and so on... In this sense, the echo of water in photography evokes its prehistory... this

"prehistorical" image of photography — a speculative image in which the apparatus itself can be thought of as not yet having emerged from the mineral and vegetable worlds... (109).

This analogy that Wall develops points to a deep-time that dovetails with Smithson's concerns with geologic time. Photography is of the earth, its mineral realm.

Silverman also relates her analogy — that of the world revealing itself through photography — to Wall's liquid intelligence. In his essay, technological intelligence is related to the optical / mechanical, and liquid intelligence is related to nature and the elemental. It is the liquid intelligence that helps us to know the 'dry' optical / mechanical apparatus and institution of photography (Wall 109). Wall also ascribes liquid intelligence with an agency that corresponds to the natural world and predicts that the evolution of the digital will displace the liquid in photography, distancing technological intelligence from "natural forms" (Wall, 110).

The materiality of Rossiter's liquiform shadow-writing emphasises the wet processes that churn with a temporality in analogue photography, metaphorically linked to the transformative and incalculable¹ character of earth processes.

DOINGS OF THE SUNBEAM²

In a twin effect — recalling the positive / negative condition of photography — the artworks of Chris McCaw are a reversal of Rossiter's sans-light images. In McCaw's work, celestial light is expressly used to make his photographs. In the sunburn series, he makes long exposures of the sky using large-format view cameras, creating a circumstance where the sun literally burns the paper's emulsion, at times producing a solarised effect where the negative image becomes a positive one. The path of the sun across the sky is burned into the surface of the photograph. The agency of the sun — its physical trace on the photograph — and the resulting record of the earth's rotation exemplifies Silverman's assertion that the world reveals itself through photography. In McCaw's photographs, the sun is the subject and means of

¹ Wall associates "liquid intelligence" with being "incalculable" and suggests that a consequence of the boundless and untold character of "incalculable" can be seen in the form of the ecological crisis (110).

² This section takes its title from an 1863 *Atlantic Monthly* essay by Oliver Wendell Holmes, "Doings of the Sunbeam", in which he laments the visual horror of wet-plate collodion photographs of scenes from the American Civil War — "for us to bear witness to the fidelity of views which the truthful sunbeam has delineated in all their dread reality" — emphasising the agency of the sun in producing these photographic visions of war (11).

creation. His scorched photographs recall the sentiments of Talbot: “It is not the artist who makes the picture, but the picture which makes *itself*” (qtd in Silverman 10).



Chris McCaw | Sunburned GSP#733 (Pacific Ocean), 2013

| Three Unique Gelatin Silver Paper Negative | © Chris McCaw, Courtesy Yossi Milo Gallery, New York

McCaw’s work highlights photographic materiality — its fragility and susceptibility to the forces of the world — and renders more tangible the notion that photography is a receptive entity. Photochemical reactions are an intrinsic condition of the sunburn series, which relates back to geophysical systems and crucial photochemical reactions such as photosynthesis and vision. As with the other examples, these photographs bring to the surface material correspondences with earth processes which might be latent in more traditional approaches to analogue photography.

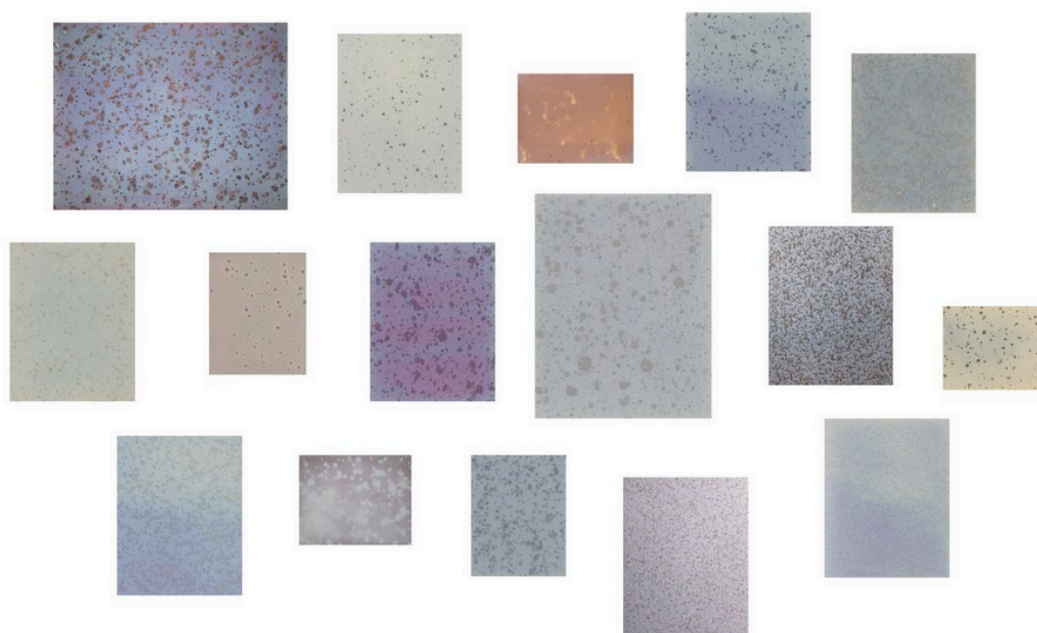
CONCLUSION

“All chaos is put into the dark inside of the art. By refusing ‘technological miracles’ the artist begins to know the corroded moments, the carboniferous states of thought, the shrinkage of mental mud, in the geologic chaos—in the strata of aesthetic consciousness. The refuse between mind and matter is a mine of information.” - Robert Smithson, *“A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects”* (107).

The analogy between earth processes and analogue photography can be related to Smithson’s abstract geology of the mind, a material thinking that coalesces with the processing of the earth. The artists that I’ve set forth as exemplars for this enquiry —

Wilson, Rossiter, and McCaw — use practical and aesthetic strategies to push the boundaries of photography's material. Wilson's photographic rock sculptures acknowledge and disrupt the frame of landscape photography while connecting to a geologic time. Rossiter's shadow-graphs, steeped in the darkroom process of liquid chemical interaction, bring to the surface photography's connection to the prehistorical earth. And McCaw's sunburn series, through photochemical reactions, recognises and employs the agency of the sun. As the materials and processes drive the artwork, authorship is questioned and conventional pictorial structures are rejected.

I examine these artists' practices because my own work is allied with theirs in the field of photography. In order to disrupt the traditional notion of landscape photography, I seek to make pictures 'with' rather than 'of' the environment. An example of this is the series of lumen prints, *untitled (desert rain)*. I use the natural phenomena of the desert rain as both the subject of and the means to create these camera-less artworks. During rain showers in the Sonoran desert, I exposed B&W photographic paper to precipitation. The interaction of moisture with the material composition of B&W paper leaves an array of coloured traces. Through the *untitled (desert rain)* project, I am proposing to offer new perspectives on landscape photography in which the physical environment is part and parcel to the art-making process.



Rebecca Najdowski | untitled (desert rain) series, 2014 |

lumen prints: B&W photographic paper, desert rain, gold toner | © Rebecca Najdowski

The aim of this research is to contribute to the field of photography by taking on a critical perspective that questions long-held assumptions about representation and authority, opening up the possibilities of the medium and challenging the conventions of landscape photography — its cultural framing and assumed primacy of human agency over the natural environment.

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Acknowledgement: I thank the RMIT non/fictionLab for support in the development of this paper.