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Attention, Sign-making, and the Tragic: On the Indexing of Ecological Icons in the Work of Harry Nankin

Jason Goroncy

Abstract

This essay examines the contribution that Australian photographer Harry Nankin (b. 1953) makes to aesthetic work alert to the realities of the Anthropocene. While much artistic response to the Anthropocene era tends towards utopian or dystopian extremes or risks producing sensationalist and 'futurist Anthropocene porn' (Lorimer 2017, 130), Nankin's approach, which is inspired, in part, by the Kabbalist notion of *tikkun olam*, offers a nuanced alternative. *Tikkun olam* transforms everyday ethical choices into cosmic acts of restoration, empowering individuals to contribute meaningfully to the world's repair 'after "the gods" have departed' (Nankin 2015, 47). The essay also analyses how Nankin's photography engages with and subverts traditional photographic conventions in subject matter and technique. It argues that Nankin's work constitutes a form of ecological iconography that simultaneously acknowledges the world's tragic, ruptured state and maintains a sense of hope. By recognising the coexistence of 'grief' and 'hope', Nankin's work raises important epistemological questions for viewers and explores the potential for photography to acknowledge and participate in nature's self-representation.

Keywords: Australia, ecology, environment, iconography, cameraless photography

> [N]ow reigns
> Full-orbed the moon, and with more pleasing light
> Shadowy sets off the face of things. (Milton 2005, 140)

> Does the cosmos hold in memory the extinct crane,
> its cool white wingtips inscribing water,
> an inkbrush in the deft hand of an ascetic?
> Will the cosmos recall what we are forgetting –
> how to receive distant kin, to offer succour
> with our bodies, opening ourselves to the sharp
> beauty of tooth and parasite, the tender
> insistence of root and fungus, offering our flesh
> as bread and wine out of love for the world?
> What solace may we seek from the tearless cosmos,
> which houses no personal god, which cares not
> if its ways are mysterious, which intends nothing

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for us? Will its quiet indifference shame us, turn
our faces to the days of spear and digging stick,
when nematode, mammoth, oak, mite, fish,
mycelium and bird – the cosmos itself –
wrote upon our flesh. (Annie Hunter, "Elegy," unpublished, shared in personal correspondence, 22 June 2022)

Figure 1: Harry Nankin, *The Fall*, 2021. Inkjet print on rag paper digitally reiterating a pair of gelatin silver shadowgrams, 102 x 130 cm. Artist's collection. Used with permission.

Introductions

Aesthetic work alert to the realities of the Anthropocene is replete with a proclivity towards either utopian or dystopian imaginations or hubristic confidence in human mastery for overcoming that which despoils life in the world. There is also work that cautions against arcadian and messianic responses to these threats. In literature, Margaret Atwood's neologism 'ustopia', which combines utopia and dystopia so that 'each contains a latent version of the other' (Atwood 2011, 66), represents just such an attempt. In the age of the digital image, such efforts are rarer, and there is also the challenge of resisting the production of Anthropocene porn[1] as clickbait. This essay attends to the ways that the work of Australian photographer Harry Nankin approaches and subverts the modes typical of the art of photography, both in its subject matter and in its use of technology. It appraises his work as a mode of ecological iconography, which thereby serves as both an example of how 'the dumb remains of iconography can become theologically

meaningful' (Levenson 1984, 282) and as a witness to the ruptured and inescapably tragic character of the world and to a world marked by hope's persistence. This not only recognises that 'art … is iconography in its essence' (Levinas 2000, 204) but it also raises challenging religious questions about the role of the iconoclast as one who, in fact, challenges 'the apparently holy, revered, and awesome' (Heschel 1962, 12), epistemological questions for the viewer of his work, as well as questions about the possibilities for photographs and photographers to assist 'nature' in writing its own photograph (see Goroncy 2025). Such ethical and hopeful activities are, for Nankin, birthed and sustained, at least in part, by the Kabbalist notion of *tikkun olam*, an idea that 'implies … redemption, not for any of us personally, but for our species and for the web of living and inanimate kin we share this precious blue orb with, and depend upon: vegetative, animal, fungi and microbe, sea and soil, stone, ice, river and air' (Nankin n.d.-d). This concept can be situated within the Jewish prophetic tradition which, as Kate Rigby explores via the work of Martin Buber, emphasises present responsibility and the possibility of change through action: '[T]he prophetic voice', she writes, 'insists on the ever-present possibility of a change in direction in the present, in the absence of which there is absolutely no promise of redemption' (Rigby 2009, 178). Or, as Terry Eagleton put it: 'The role of the prophet is not to predict the future, but to remind the people that if they carry on as they are doing, the future will be exceedingly bleak' (Eagleton 2003a, 175; see Figure 1: *The Fall*). Within this prophetic framework, *tikkun olam* entails the covenantal responsibility to honour the divine and pursue justice, including through the fulfilment of custodial responsibilities towards the earthly creation (Gen. 2:15; Lev. 25:24). It is from this tradition that Nankin's work draws its dual character: acknowledging rupture while maintaining hope, witnessing catastrophe while calling for repair.

Nankin's schoolteachers recognised his artistic gifts. And while he didn't share their confidence, he went on to study under the sculptor Karl Duldig who encouraged him to move to Vienna, replicating Duldig's career path. But Nankin refused this invitation: 'I didn't see it as useful.… [I was] environmentally conscious. I didn't see how it could help the environment' (Harry Nankin, personal communication, 22 March 2022). Thus, in the late 1970s, Nankin pursued work as a town planner before returning to art—first drawing, then sculpture, and, finally, photography—via some research undertaken, from 1982, for the Australian Conservation Foundation, with whom he worked on the Victorian Alpine National Park campaign, producing calendars and writing *Victoria's Alps* (1983). *Victoria's Alps* and *Range upon Range* (1987) reflected and sharpened Nankin's sensitivity, curiosity, and emotional response to the natural environment. Since then, he has published on the relationship between ecology and photography and has spent over 25 years exhibiting and teaching photography, most recently at the RMIT University's School of Art in Naarm/Melbourne.

In his review of George Seddon's *Searching for the Snowy: An Environmental History* (1994), Nankin suggested that the title's opening word—'Searching'—evokes a 'deep appreciation through objective knowledge, direct experience and creative response' (Nankin 1994a, 8). This observation might well apply to Nankin's own work, which represents his perpetual quest for connection, for home, 'for contact' and 'a sense of reciprocity' (Harry Nankin, personal communication, 22 March 2022). This reciprocity is not, for Nankin, to be understood in the Beckerian or Husserlian sense, but rather concerns something more like a being 'open to something' (Harry Nankin, personal communication, 22 March 2022. See Becker 1990; Husserl 1960, 120). In a 2022 interview, he recalled being in his late 20s and living in Aotearoa New Zealand, and paying a visit to Fiordland:

> Even though I love the glory of the sublime Milford [Sound], I realised that that wasn't my home. So, when I came back to Australia, I said: "Well, maybe it's this country I have to pay attention to because it's what my unconscious was telling me." I could remember crying, holding these trees, and [asking]: "Why?" It's not about the people so much as the land. (Harry Nankin, personal communication, 22 March 2022)[2]

Nankin currently lives on Dja Dja Wurrung Country, upon which he reflects:

> I decided, having moved here, … that I needed to engage with this country. It's a very damaged country—it's gold mining country, it's a horrific story, really. Despite the goldfields, it's really a country of death, both for indigenous people and for the natural ecology, because the forest you see is the second and third and fourth generation regrowth from devastation.… So what is growing here is depauperate … [and] struggling, and with climate change is struggling even more.… When I was first a photographer, I wanted to photograph wilderness … but now I realise my interest is not wilderness per se; it's the tragic, but I'm not interested in Anthropocene porn.… I'm not interested in celebrating or somehow making beautiful the destruction; there are lots of people doing that.… I'm much more interested in the subtle sense of resilience, recovery, [and] struggle of the natural world, *despite us*.… So, I'm looking for places where nature is still evident but may not be in any sense pristine. And I'm particularly interested in the sense of presence.… I felt this for the first time when I went bushwalking, when I was 15, to Lerderderg Gorge; I felt a sense of presence. And I didn't know what it was—[it is] not God (… I don't think there's a supernatural outsider to the universe), it's something else. It's some sense of the ecological presence. (Harry Nankin, personal communication, 22 March 2022)[3]

Nankin's 'looking' found concrete form in several small art projects—*Cathexis* (1992), *Contact* (2002-03; see Figure 2: *Contact/Quadrat 9 (The Night of October 26)*), *The Rain* (2003), and, most recently, *Acts of Ritual* (2021-). More ambitious projects, including *The Wave* (1997), accompanied these. Lake Tyrrell in Victoria's Mallee was the birthplace for three further projects—*Syzygy* (2007-16), *The Impossibility of Knowing the Mind of Another Kind of Living Being* (2011), and *The End of the Age of Entitlement* (2014). In addition, Mount Buffalo in Victoria's high country birthed two

related projects—*Minds in the Cave* (2011-12) and *Ekkyklêma* (2014).[4] These projects—ambitious in scope, and highly organised, involved, and physically taxing in execution—explored how an 'ecopoetics of place resonant of human/nonhuman relations and Tragedy can be created through cameraless photography' (Nankin 2015, 13). Nankin appraises his work as a contribution to 'the biosemiotic reimagining and anti-anthropocentric repositioning of invertebrates and "landscape" within photography in ways that aim to legitimise the tragic form as an appropriate aesthetic frame through which to apprehend our ecological predicament' (Nankin 2015, 12).

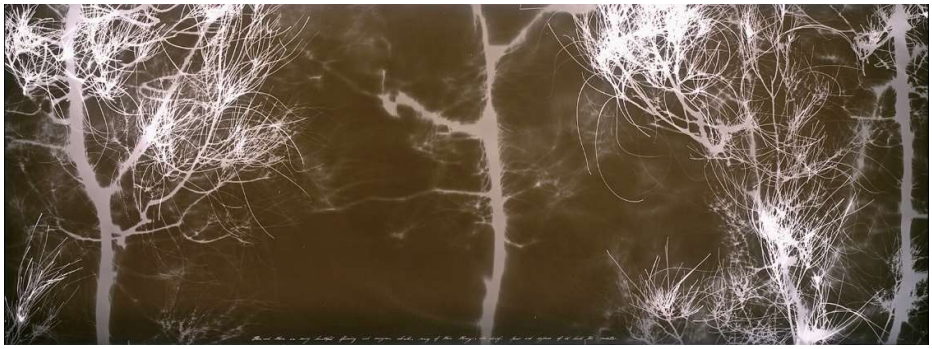

Figure 2: Harry Nankin, *Contact/Quadrat 9 (The Night of October 26)*, 2003. Hand-inscribed, toned gelatin silver film shadowgram in mylar envelope, 74 x 199 cm. Mildura Arts Centre, Mildura, Australia. Used with permission.

Nankin sees the 'natural world as an escape, as a kind of safe place', as well as something 'spiritual, something beyond the human condition, something outside a crude, petty nature of human relations' (Harry Nankin, personal communication, 22 March 2022),[5] reflecting a desire for connection he shares with other landscape photographers, like Paul Caponigro. Despite his efforts, Nankin remains haunted by the desire to construct a narrative from the shards of his own impoverished and traumatised past. His childhood, marred by emotional wounds and a spiritual void, bears the scars of his father's self-destructive behaviour and its ripple effects on the family. That desire inspired a pilgrimage in 1994 to Chelm, his father Morris's hometown in Poland ('the whole country's a cemetery' (Harry Nankin, personal communication, 22 March 2022)). The same desire is apparent in the *Craters of the Moon* (1999-2019) project that emerged from that experience and marks an eagerness to map 'the cultural geography of genocide' (Nankin 2022a). He writes:

> The project deals with 'place' as an arena of displacement. It attempts to make sense of the chasm between three disjointed worlds: an assimilated

> Australian present, an imagined Europe at the moment before Shoah, and the searing absence that has contaminated that landscape ever since. (Nankin 2022a)

Here, Nankin's Jewishness breaks its way through into his reading of the world, the sombreness with which he feels the vicissitudes of history, and in his artistic sensitivities and judgements—that, in the spirit of Theodor Adorno, Paul Celan, and Shirley Cass, 'the most successful art in any medium usually emerges out of difficult subjects, moral dilemmas and contradictory impulses'—and, to a lesser extent, interests.[6] This quest coincides with Nankin's long fascination with atlases and their record of a sense of deep time and space that helps Nankin 'feel repaired by making empirical sense of a dangerous, complicated world' (Harry Nankin, personal communication, 22 June 2022).

Unrestricted by the subject matter of the Earth, Nankin has a growing interest in astronomical themes, probing whether amid the 'escalating ecological crisis … solace (or redemption, or hope) [can] be found in the great wilderness of the heavens' (Nankin 2022b); a forthcoming book, 'an augury'—*Gathering Shadows: The Eco-photography of Harry* Nankin—plus a series of photographs in the projects *The Ravens* (2007-21), *Moiré* (2007-21), *Elegy* (2007-21), *Dancing on Mars* (2007-21), *Refraction* (2001), and *A Poetics of Space* (2022-), a project inspired by a hand-drawn German atlas of the moon published in 1936, as well as Gaston Bachelard's *La Poétique de l'Espace* (1957), bear further witness to this interest. He describes the making of his *Elegy* series, produced from photos of deep space taken from Lake Tyrrell and Mount Buffalo, as a 'faux-scientific ritual or performance' (Nankin 2015, 76) of 'grief and hope: a photo-kinetic coda for lost and imagined worlds' (Nankin 2022b). Together, they chronicle 'barbarism', 'anthropocentrism', 'wildness', and the 'sacrosanct' (Harry Nankin, personal communication, 22 March 2022), and they ask: 'What will it feel like to peer into the night sky and behold not our ancestor's immaculate orb of awe, lullabies, magic and dreams available to all and owned by none, but an irrevocably defaced industrial hodgepodge controlled by the privileged and the powerful?' (Nankin 2022c).

Nankin has also taken a deep interest in the work of other artists—particularly photographers such as Walker Evans, Ansel Adams, and David Tatnall, and also Peter Dombrovskis, whose labour is concerned with 'the revelatory power' of photography 'almost as a moral imperative' (Nankin 1996, 9),[7] and with 'saving ["the wild environment"] through the lens by helping others see as well' (Brown and Nankin 1996, 26)—and Australian writers such as Judith Wright, Stephen Pyne, Alan Marshall, Freya Mathews, and William Lines, whose work attends to something like both 'the earth's spiritual "intangibles"' and its unambiguous—and fragile—muscularity (Nankin 1996, 9).[8]

All the while, Nankin is seeking to make contact.

Below, I shall argue that Nankin's work, undertaken as an expression of this search and the recognition of how it is shaped by the human story, concerns the indexing of ecological icons. This work begins with sustained attention to—the gaze upon—the subject matter.

Gazing

Nankin writes:

> I'm interested in "the problem of nature", 'that is, the problem of The Other. The non-human. Everything not of or made by people. Air and ants. Bandicoots and beaches. Grasshoppers and grassland. Moss and mountains. The planet we are on and the night sky above. And most especially where it all comes together in what we casually call "landscape". (Nankin 2016, 19)

Landscape is that which 'begins when it absorbs or dissolves all presences into itself' (Nancy 2005, 58); it is all that 'country becomes after "the gods" have departed' (Nankin 2015, 47). Whether it is due to sensitivities about cultural appropriation or something else, Nankin, appropriately so, does not take up in any sustained way a focus on Aboriginal understandings of Country wherein deities and wider ecologies are inseparable. Neither, for Nankin, is attention to the 'problem' of this Other driven principally by questions of epistemology[9]—of 'outwitting the world' (Sontag 1977, 104) through the camera, as it were—and still less by mere curiosity. Instead, he is pressed by a desire to attend to basic, primal questions of an ontological and ethical nature framed in fidelity to his own cultural roots—about the energy that is unexhausted by matters such as geographical appearance and that animates all. Nankin names this search 'an *ecological gaze*', described variously as 'a speculative aesthetic stance articulating a self-reflexive response to ecological knowledge, experiences and phenomena' (Nankin 2015, 18; cf. Barthes 1982, 38), as 'a poetic engagement with the ecological as "fact" (scientifically verifiable phenomena) and "affect" (feeling)' (Nankin 2016, 19. See further, Langer 1933, 1950, 1953), and as

> thinking, feeling and seeing informed by the physical and temporal relationship between living things, including human beings, to the earth—and beyond.… [E]cological thinking begins with ideas about cosmological space, geological time, evolutionary descent and ecological interdependence; ecological feeling erupts in the radical re-evaluation of one's humanity that ecological thinking demands; ecological seeing is the more-than-visual gaze transformed by ecological cognition and emotion. (Harry Nankin, personal communication, 22 June 2022)

Nankin's ecological gaze and its employment of analogic shadowgram resolution, inspired in part by Victor Stoichiţă's work, also relates to a heightening of the sense of place as predicament, wherein the 'terrestrial inhabitation and the full-scale gestalt of non-human otherness' is accentuated against the ecological imaginary (Nankin 2013, 3. See also Nankin 2013, 6; Stoichiță 2019). This approach advocates for an aesthetic perspective that focuses on ecological elements, dynamics, and interconnections while

maintaining a self-aware attitude towards non-human entities. The framework draws inspiration from various ethical, aesthetic, and philosophical critiques of how Western culture perceives and interacts with nature. While considering multiple viewpoints, it privileges empirical and environmentalist 'nature endorsing' stances over postmodern scepticism towards the concept of nature.[10]

While the notion of the 'ecological' can be associated with something like a metanarrative, Nankin insists that 'its "gaze" is not intended to be prescriptive but rather a poetic engagement with the non-human "other" as ontology, phenomena, ethics and affect' (Nankin 2013, 3). He attends to objects as pathways and recognitions of, and connection and communication between, realities and systems that already share the one bios, energy, and emergence and already facilitate kinesthetic awareness. This move describes a mode of attention to the 'unsettling, post-humanist aesthetic' (Nankin 2013, 3) Nankin associates with threatened places. Here Nankin draws inspiration from Timothy Morton's idea of 'dark ecology', a notion concerned with maintaining the fact that despite claims to the contrary—'a hippie aesthetic of life over death, or a sadistic-sentimental Bambification of sentient beings'—nature has a 'dark side', a side Morton associates with 'a "goth" assertion of the contingent and necessarily queer idea that we want to stay with a dying world' (Morton 2007, 184-85). This dark ecology 'undermines the naturalness of the stories we tell about how we are involved in nature' and 'preserves the dark, depressive quality of life in the shadow of ecological catastrophe' (Morton 2007, 187). So Nankin: 'A shadow is never alone.… I encounter the shadows of ecological attenuation everywhere' (Harry Nankin, personal communication, 22 June 2022). Nankin sees in Morton's work a way to avoid *both* 'an escape into sentimentalising nature'—something like the kitsch that marks much 'nature writing' (Morton 2007, 124), 'naive environmentalisms' (Morton 2007, 122; Cf. Nankin 1994b, 8), and ecomimetic art—and the 'aestheticising of crisis' (Nankin 2013, 3). For Nankin: '[A]n ecological gaze utilising a suitably "noir" *visual* ecomimetics could signify non-human "presence", pry meaningful specificities out of an amorphous ambience like "region", and convey relevant emotion or cognition' (Nankin 2013, 3). Nankin's attempt to foreground such an approach has two modes: First, a shift from the detached and apparent objectivity of monocular optics to the proximate intimacy and 'indexical poetics' made possible through 'camera-less shadows'; second, the avoidance of an oversimplified visual vocabulary, 'trite epiphanies' (Solnit 2007, as quoted in Nankin 2013, 3), and questionable ontological assumptions prevalent in traditional landscape photography. Instead, Nankin adopts a more suggestive symbolic system using ecological elements that serve as direct indices of specific locations—matters to which this essay will return.

In response to a chance hearing from Paul Carter at Mildura Airport of a story about Lake Tyrrell, a traditional celestial observatory for the (now-

disappeared) Boorong people in Victoria's Mallee (see Stanbridge 1858, 137-40; Morieson 1966; Hamacher and Frew 2010), and in part response to Carter's poetic *raison d'être* about his *Nearamnew*[11] work on the pavement of Federation Square, Naarm/Melbourne, Nankin led a four-year project that began in March 2007 called *Syzygy* (see Nankin 2015, 110-49). The word derives from the Greek σύζυγος and refers to the yoking together of two or more objects or the conjunction or opposition of a celestial body with the sun. 'Part photograph, part sculpture and part performance' (Dzenis 1997, 6),[12] and alert to the ways that attention to landscape tragedy cannot be disentangled from Aboriginal lore, deep time,[13] and the horrors of colonial dispossession, Nankin described the rationale for his mythopoetic project as follows:

> To consider an 'ecological gaze' at a time of the putative 'end of nature' is to engage in 'dark ecology', a mournful attendance to global ecological destruction, the collateral termination of the moribund ontological binary 'man/nature' and the concomitant decay of spatial ecological identity. To uncover an ecological gaze photographically is to bear witness to what might be characterized as ecological 'tragedy' for which the germane ocular trope is not a morbid iconography revealed by reflected light but an elegiac index of shadows, and not distancing monocular hubris but a visceral chiasm of binocular seeing, photo-kinetic action and photo-chemical reaction.… The heavens mirrored in [the lake's] shallow waters informed a sacred reciprocity of sky with country, reciprocity long since ruptured. *Syzygy* reflects upon this sacrament and its loss by turning the lake's surface into a photographic focal plane that no longer reciprocates the heavens. (Nankin 2010b, 91)[14]

The concern to attend to that besieged purity attests to both the loss of and the longed-for possibility of signs, ghosts, residues, indicia of an ecology unmarked by violence, and the indelible imprints of trauma and ruination whose deepest work happens, as it were, away from the camera's gaze. As one who has dedicated his life's work to ecological iconography, about which I shall say more below, Nankin has been repeatedly drawn to Lake Tyrrell on the promise, well attested, that here,

> the heavens are left to mirror the land as it might be remembered, not as it has become. It is a double ('reflected') loss: the absence of an intact ecological surface and the undoing of an imagined pairing or reciprocity of earth with sky. (Nankin 2010b, 92)

He is drawn too by hope—however enfeebled, nanoscopic, and impossible—of repair, a subject I shall return to. His work asks about the possibility of connection with that which has been ruptured through attendance to the rupture itself as a sign-bearing location of what has perished.

Tenses

Nankin's work as a professional photographer began with landscapes—in colour, for books and calendars. He proceeded to capture black and white

images with a camera, welcoming creative results and technical flexibility unavailable to colour. His service to something like a 'moral and aesthetic mission' (Sontag 1977, 103)[15] is best pursued, he believes, through photography. The phenomenologically-intersubjective character of photography offers a unique capacity to bear witness to or re-view the world in ways that heighten ecological consciousness by recording both what is visible to the naked eye and revealing the otherwise unseen—from microscopic details to distant celestial bodies, from rapid movements to gradual changes, from dim phenomena to intense light sources. This includes hidden objects and light outside the spectrum of unaided human vision.

So the *Syzygy* project, for example, uses referent creatures, cosmic light, and glass plates to capture 'what is past, already or eventually dead' (Nankin 2010b, 96). It draws inspiration from Susan Sontag, Roland Barthes, Jay Prosser, and others, for whom photography is not about documenting what once was (and which, in fact, still may in some sense be) but rather is a realisation, a kind of confession of—and elegy for—what has been lost: 'Photography is the medium in which we unconsciously encounter the dead' (Prosser 2005, 1. See also Barthes 1982, 76-77, 85, 88-89; Sontag 1977, 14, 135-47). So appraised, 'photographs are not signs of prescience but evidence of absence' (Prosser 2005, 1), of reality escaped. The photograph serves—or at least can do—as a reminder of time's irrevocability, of the mortality that marks all things, and of the 'inexorable loss that *is* life' (Prosser 2005, 2).[16] Photographs are, therefore, unavoidably melancholic objects. They are not an *aide-mémoire*; they are a *memento mori*, testimony not to 'the presence of the past' but rather to 'the pastness of the present' (Prosser 2005, 1).

Photography not only makes tangible the loss; it also, arguably, makes possible the knowing of such, perhaps even in heightened and lengthened modes: 'After the event has ended, the picture will still exist, conferring on the event a kind of immortality (and importance) it would never otherwise have enjoyed' (Sontag 1977, 10). Others have spoken similarly about photography's trading with *tense*. The German-Jewish philosopher Walter Benjamin, for example, describes early photography as 'the cult of remembrance of loved ones, absent or dead' (Benjamin 2007b, 226). For Sontag, photographs transfer 'irrefutable pathos as a message from time past', serving as 'a trace, something directly stenciled off the real', the means by which reality (which is 'recalcitrant' and 'inaccessible') is both imprisoned (made to stand still) and enlarged (Sontag 1977, 49, 135, 144). Photographs are 'a material vestige of its subject in a way that no painting can be' (Sontag 1977, 136); they depersonalise 'our relation to the world' and promote 'discontinuous ways of seeing' (Sontag 1977, 147, 149). Moreover, photographs have forced on us 'something about the world's own deadness, its inert resistance to whatever it is we may hope or want' (Elkins 2011, xi-xii).

Specifically, it is cameraless imaging, or shadowgrams, Nankin believes, that best achieves this extending of 'the dark subtext' (Nankin 2015, 15) of a camera's vision, and so serves his concerns of 'trying to work out what works emotionally' (Harry Nankin, personal communication, 22 March 2022).[17] Cameraless photography's attention to and apprehension of its subject offers innovative possibilities to witness to what is there but almost invariably goes unnoticed. This possibility is heightened due to photography's indexical character that affords the (usually) mechanical eyewitness a kind of authority typically not given to those who record and re-present things and events with other kinds of human technology, such as words. Nankin suggests that 'the tactile, photochemical or electronic relationship to the world intrinsic to the act of light capture, the material imprint described by Susan Sontag as "like a footprint or a death mask" is generally backgrounded' (Nankin 2015, 65. See also Nankin, 2010b, 95), helping him to avoid the (false) charge of separating 'nature' and 'technology' (see Murray 1997).

Most of all, cameraless *plein air* photography, or photograms, can 'turn the landscape into the camera' (Nankin 2015, 67. See Calado 2004), can give Nature 'the power to reproduce herself' (Daguerre 1956, 78). Contact printing invertebrates in situ—and by starlight—makes *Syzygy* and the *Minds in the Cave* project to be, by all accounts, unique photographic experiments, their only real precedent being work undertaken by the French daguerreotypist Antoine Claudet in the 1840s.[18] Unlike photograms, daguerreotypes are not strictly cameraless, however. Geoffrey Batchen describes cameraless photography as 'almost elemental in its simplicity':

> Unmediated by perspectival optics, photography is here presented as something to be looked at, not through, and to be made, not taken. After all, a cameraless photograph is not just of something; it is something. A reversed-tone inversion of the natural order of things, such photographs even appear to emit their own light, to emanate rather than record their images. Placed thus within the inverted commas of candid self-reflection, photography is freed from its traditional subservient role as a realist mode of representation and allowed instead to become a searing index of its own operations, to become an art of the real.… In every sense, then, this is photography in its most primal state. (Batchen 2016, 5, 6)[19]

Nankin's *plein air* forest shadowgrams of *I Terra Thou* (1993-94) and those under sea coast in *The Wave* (1996-97) were possibly the first life-scale, in situ, cameraless photographic recordings of living ecosystems and the ocean, respectively, ever attempted. His devotion to cameraless photography, however, relates not one whit to any nostalgia, avant-gardism (such as that associated with the German Dadaist Christian Schad or the Hungarian Bauhausian László Moholy-Nagy), or maverickism that attends the discarding of more familiar photographic conventions—it wasn't 'because I wanted to be cool' (Harry Nankin, personal communication, 22 March 2022). Neither is he especially fixated on the technology itself, as appears to have been the case for Wilhelm Röntgen, Augusto Bobone, Josef Maria Eder,

Eduard Valenta, Louis Darget, Madge Donohoe, Ada Deane (see Warrick 1939), Karl Ludwig Freiherr von Reichenbach, Charles David Winter, Jakob von Narkiewicz-Jodko, and Man Ray (see Cocteau 1922), among others—'I'm not [interested in] using cameras or equipment for their own sake' (Harry Nankin, personal communication, 22 March 2022).[20]

Indeed, Nankin is quite philosophically troubled by the camera and its association with modernist anthropic views of nature. But the technology's attraction lies in the way it lends itself to attention, to absence, to shadows, to ambience—and to the elegiac indexing of such—and so fits his ecological concerns. This is especially true of cameraless photography:

> I wanted to make a closer link between artists, myself, emotion, the material I recorded, and the ecosystem. To bring them all together, I felt that if the material touched the landscape, and I was touching the material and landscape, then there'd be a greater connection. It was this indexical process that I was interested in. Not that black and white isn't indexical, but it's still got a camera in between the two.… [But cameraless photography is] a very intimate thing: the silver receives the light in the film from the subject. The silver then is in contact with other silver, exposed to light. There's a direct indexical link between the subject and the print. (Harry Nankin, personal communication, 22 March 2022)

Cameraless photography offers a way of emphasising the 'heightened semiotic indexicality' of things (Nankin 2015, 66; cf. Nankin 2016, 19). Thus does Nankin's work recall William Henry Fox Talbot's early observations that photography is more about recognising an *indexical* truth-to-presence—that *something was there*—than it is about truth-to-appearance.[21] Its indexicality relates to its attendance to *sense*—'the bodily and binocular memories of human participants'—and to *making records*—'the kinetic 'touch' of creatures and plates imprinting image-holding film surfaces and, pre-eminently, the photochemical punctum of ancient cosmic photons energizing silver halides' (Nankin 2010b, 97).

Digitalised and enlarged images 'reveal', on this reading, 'a hitherto unseen world that is at once orderly and chaotic, alien and familiar, oppressive and playful, repulsive and beautiful.… [The] pictures elicit a range of cultural meanings connected to the tangled semiotics of insects and shadows' (Nankin 2013, 6-7). Nankin is conscious of the prehistoric and Platonic (see Nankin 2015, 72-75) associations of 'shadows' with things such as memory, danger, evil, un/consciousness, the soul (see Frazer 1900, 285-92), death, '*exscriptive*' writing or mark making (Lippit 2005, 55), the uncanny, shamanism (Lewis-Williams 2016), animism, and atomic explosions—'the "atomic-light" body imprints of Hiroshima and Nagasaki' (Nankin 2010b, 95)—as well as something like John Milton's 'shadow[s] of heaven' (Milton 2005, 155). He is equally alert to the fascination with shadows in the work of filmmakers and other photographers, as well as those who study them. Indeed, Nankin locates his work in this broader tradition that makes possible the exploitation of the 'light-darkness dialectic' and 'divide' (Stoichiță 2019, 9,

193) and the ubiquitous shadow epistemologies at play in the West's myths of origin. 'Photography, a technological descendent of the celebrated Corinthian trace, is a recorder *of* shadows but cameraless photographs—photograms or shadow-grams', like his bogong moth pictures, '*are* shadows: they doubly implicate absence'. Nankin suggests that they 'evidence the lost referent, the "absent part"' of such origins, and thereby function as 'indices of place and predicament' wherever life is marked by 'extinction, biodiversity decline and landscape transformation in the face of anthropogenic climate change' (Ramsenthaler 2003, 9, as quoted in Nankin 2013, 11). He describes his landscape photography as an effort to recast as membranes topographic shadows, 'like peeling away the skin of the earth' (Harry Nankin, personal communication, 22 June 2022). It may even be true, he suggests, that 'shadows cast by flash in an *ersatz* mountain cave', such as those at The Horn, Mount Buffalo, where bogong moths gather, 'offer a more affectually convincing rendition of lepidoptera biotics than the crystal seeing of reflected daylight could ever elicit' (Nankin 2013, 12).

> Just as the shadow of an otherwise invisible atom infers something particular about the structure of the visible world, the hitherto unseen shadows of bogong moths poetically indicate something tangible and far larger. In a world blinded by anthropic glare the most evocative poetic expression of our dark ecological condition may yet be found among the abject and shadows. (Nankin 2013, 12. On the bogong moth, see Nankin 2015, 154-58)

Insectum

Reminiscent of Anna Atkins's cyanotype prints of seaweed and algae (Atkins 1843), and Atkins's work, with Anne Dixon, on ferns,[22] Cecilia Louisa Glaisher's salt bush prints of the same subject, as well those on snow crystals,[23] William Henry Fox Talbot's *Dandelion Seeds*,[24] and the work of Nankin's contemporaries Susan Derges and Anne Noble,[25] Nankin's work has documented the lives of vulnerable high country plants (such as alpine heath [*Epacris serpyllifolia*], feldmark grass [*Rytidosperma pumilum*], and silky snow-daisy [*Celmisia sericophylla*]) (see Nankin 1983, 31-40), waves,[26] rain,[27] and small creatures, such as meat ants (*Iridomyrmex purpureus*), termites (*Heterotermes ferox),* butterflies (*Piereidae*), funnel-web (*Mygalomorphae*) and wolf spiders (*Lycosidae*), true bugs (*Hemiptera*), various beetles (including longhorn [*Cerambycidae*], click [*Elateridae*], scarab [*Melolonthinae*], rove [*Staphylinidae*], ground beetles [*Carabidae*], and tiger beetles [*Megacephala australis*]), and, especially, the bogong moth, *Agrotis infusa*, including its morphology and behaviour. The latter represents 'a special case of locational specificity indicative of the Australian Alps' (Nankin 2015, 103), the creature appraised as something of a 'bioregional "icon"' (Nankin 2016, 19), 'an ecological indice', and 'a metaphor for vulnerability, displacement, mortality and loss' (Nankin 2013, 6. See also Nankin 1983, 52-53; Sánchez-Bayo and Wyckhuys 2019). These have also

been the subject of Nankin's moth liturgies (Nankin, n.d.-a, n.d.-b; Walker 2016; see Figure 3: *Moth Liturgy 1*).

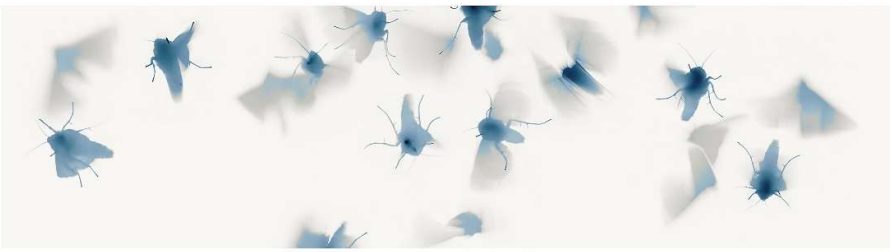

Figure 3: Harry Nankin, *Moth Liturgy 1*, 2016. Pigment inkjet print on archival rag paper, 51 x 187 cm. Artist's collection. Used with permission.

But why insects at all? Drawing on the biosemiotic theories of Jakob von Uexküll and Eduardo Kohn, Nankin writes: '[I]nsect *umwelten* [environments] operates [sic] as an index of nonhuman selfhood and place[,] and insect *abjection* alludes to the multiple "tragedies" of the human and non-human ecological predicament' (Nankin 2015, 12. See Uexküll 2010; Kohn 2013). It is precisely sharing and entering into the *umwelt* of such creatures Nankin desires, however much the 'voice' and *umwelt* of such creatures remain out of human reach or comprehension. At the end of the day, however, despite Nankin's reverent attention to his subjects and his desire to recognise their voices, we have the voice of the artist but not the voice of the images or their subjects—the waves, the termites, the moths. Perhaps this is inescapable? Certainly, insects like the bogong moth have 'scant cultural presence' (Nankin 2015, 102). But—and maybe this relates directly to their being hidden from us—insects also offer a microcosmic way of highlighting 'anthropocentric indifference to the plight of the terrestrial non-human "other"' (Nankin 2016, 21). Invertebrates, 'the little things that run the world' (Wilson 1987, 344-46),[28] exemplify 'ecological complexity and interdependence' (Nankin 2015, 102). Here, Nankin's work honours Pliny's conviction, in his *Naturalis Historia*, that '*natura nusquam magis quam in minimis tota sit* [Nature is to be found in its entirety nowhere more than in her smallest creatures]' (Pliny 1489, 11).[29]

But Nankin is also concerned with highlighting two conflicting details—concerning abjection and agency. He recognises insects as 'life forms of almost universal disdain' (Nankin 2013, 8).[30] 'I'm interested in the abject because the abject is what our society obviously rejects and ignores.… So much of the nonhuman world is abject, which is a deeply a-ecological way of thinking about the world' (Harry Nankin, personal communication, 22 March 2022). Drawing on Julia Kristeva's work, he writes: 'In the collective cultural

imagination [insects] are trivial, lowly, mindless creatures detested as "vectors for disease and psychosis" and "pestiferousness"' (Brown 2006, x, as quoted in Nankin 2013, 8). In most cultures, insects are ignoble and 'radically excluded' (Kristeva 1982, 2).[31] 'Insects are an instance, it, thing or phenomena, rarely a being, a he or she and never whom. Some may be tasty, useful, pretty or interesting but all remain, at base, alien and decidedly abject in the sense that they possess … "only one quality of the object—that of being opposed to *I*"' (Kristeva 1982, 1, as quoted in Nankin 2013, 8).

A second detail concerns agency and the 'surprising individuality of each creature' (Nankin 2016, 21). Photography makes possible a reassessment of a creature's 'default abjection' and their 'subjective lives as autonomous ecological agents or "selves"' (Nankin 2016, 21).[32] So Nankin:

> [L]ooking at these photographic enlargements of bogong moths, particularly viewed up close, our expectations are mollified by a surprising individuality: we are privy to the 'interpersonal' minutiae of antennae meeting antennae, thorax and wing, hexapodic ambling, exploration, nestling, flutter, hovering and flight. (Nankin 2013, 8)

This allows us to recognise, in this case, the bogong moth—although, by extension, other creatures too—as biosemiotic, as 'evolutionarily evolved symbolically coded systems of communication'. Nankin continues:

> [R]ather than being autonomic *objects* (meaning-less non-beings), organisms can be understood as sign-making and sign-sensing *subjects* (meaning-directed beings) embedded in and responsive to their peculiar species-specific ecological 'perceptual life-world' or *umwelten*. Biosemiotics shifts analytical perspective from the reductionist determinism of traditional biophysiology to the subjective individuality and intentionality of sign production and reception at every level of ecological existence. In addition to enlarging our understanding of ecological processes and the semiotic minutiae of their lives[,] the uncovering of biosemiotic signification among non-humans opens us to the possibility of finding meaning in their idiosyncratic life-worlds. From a biosemiotic perspective, these pictures of patently delicate bogong moths draw our attention to their existence and fragility and, by association, the alpine region for which they are icons as well our own increasingly problematic *umwelten*. (Uexküll 2010, 2, as quoted in Nankin 2013, 9)

But 'icons' and 'signs' of what exactly? For Nankin, the bogong moth is an indexing icon of Victoria's high country itself, that 'huge and ancient cordillera of congealed time' (Nankin 1983, 25) that has now, in the contemporary ecological crisis, also become 'a metaphor for vulnerability, displacement, mortality and loss' (Nankin 2016, 19).

Signum

Nankin is an iconographer—or, more properly, an indexer of icons—whose work functions not as an object of veneration or as an apathetic piece of decoration but as both a mirror and window to time as fragility and resistance as vulnerability. His work arises from a well-formed intuition that the world

is readable—and accessible—through human attention, labour, practices, mistakes, and pursuing of instincts, no matter how inconspicuous they might be. More particularly, it arises from a conviction that the material landscape—including, and perhaps especially, its shadows—is marked with insignia, energies, 'a promise of limitless possibilities' (Ouspensky 1989, 27), glyphs, 'trite epiphanies' (Solnit 2007), sacred reciprocities, and 'sacrament[s]' (Nankin 2010b, 91). Reading the world such, 'icons' (Nankin 2010b, 99) like the bogong moth and ants and their nest detritus, for example, work to transfigure human passions and assist us to 'get beyond the "circle of hermeneutics"' (Ricœur 1969, 355).

Here, Nankin's work owes some debt to Charles Sanders Peirce's instrumental work in semiotics and its recognition in the world of a triad of inescapably related signs – *icons*, which resemble or imitate that which is being signified; *indexes*, which have a direct causal or physical connection to that which is signified; and *symbols*, through which the signified is inferred through language, traffic lights, and so on. (Peirce 1894; 1955, 108; 1986, 66-68; Saussure 2011). Together, they recall that the possibility of meaning making depends on both referential contexts and systemic codes. According to Peirce, 'we think only in signs' (Peirce 1932, 302), in representations. 'All reasoning is an interpretation of signs of some kind' (Peirce 1894). While nothing is a sign *in itself*, when recognised as such, words, sounds, images, smells, actions, objects, road signs, photographs, and so on can become signs when they are invested with meaning and 'interpreted' as such (Peirce 1932, 308).[33] While one may question why he needs to indebt himself to Peirce's Procrustean and technical approach to the subject, Nankin, who works more intuitively than Peircean models suggest, reads the world as biosemiotically signed, and so as read-able, intentional, sense-able, meaning-full, photographable, and alive—even conscious—all the way down. Moreover, because Nankin understands such signs as in some way participating in that to which they point, they are 'more than a signal or convention of communication' (Levenson 1976, 16). This concern with *subject matter*, *meaning*, and *being* in his work, instead of focusing on the *form* such takes, is entirely consistent with its iconographic character.[34]

One might indeed position artistry of all sorts among the countless human practices of *poiesis*, best understood as part of a wider spectrum of imaginative and creative activities in which human beings make sense of, respond symbolically to, and thereby shape and reshape the world in material ways. Insofar as this is true, Nankin's work stands among those by artists deliberately opposed to the Enlightenment's disenchanting of the world. As Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno observed about that program:

> It wanted to dispel myths, to overthrow fantasy with knowledge.… The disenchantment of the world means the extirpation of animism.… Myth becomes enlightenment and nature mere objectivity. Human beings purchase the increase in their power with estrangement from that over which

> it is exerted. Enlightenment stands in the same relationship to things as the dictator to human beings. He knows them to the extent that he can manipulate them. The [person] of science knows things to the extent that [they] can make them. (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 1, 2, 6)

The grammar of 'icon' recalls that the world might be read, appraised, and inhabited otherwise. It is also inescapably religious language, whereby it recalls that material 'stuff' is the medium through which the sacred Other is mediated to creatures and creatures to it. And it assumes that the entire creation is so charged, pregnant with the possibility of deeper discoveries, the unveilings of mysteries hidden below the surface of things, the uncoverings of the fact that whatever is revealed remains veiled amid disclosure and disclosed while veiled.

Appraising the world with nonabrasive and exposed perplexity, extraordinary patience, and demureness, Nankin's work is stamped by a conviction that the world we inhabit is inscripted—and inscriptable—and by a commitment to sign-making and sign-indexing of things small, like meat ants, and large, like deep space, as a way to understand better the relationships that exist between things past, present, and passing away.[35] It is marked too with extraordinary attention to the particularities of time, landscape, ritual, and seasons—a deliberate effort to counter the dominant and dominating narratives of reduction and of an ectopic cosmocracy that characterise the wasteland of modernity's technocratic myths, but without any of the retreat into the excessive and mawkish romanticism that marked earlier departures.

Tragedy

From the above, it has, I hope, become clear enough that Nankin's work represents an attempt—through cultivated and sacred attention to the shards of a shattered world, its abject parts, and humanity's 'ontological homelessness' (Steiner 2004, 2)—to recognise and index the deep connection that exists between things, and to recognise and recover lost enchantment and integrity in a time of unyielding chaos and disconnection. His ecological iconography, therefore, simultaneously acknowledges the world's tragic, ruptured state and maintains a sense of hope. It represents a critical consciousness that modernity, along with those efforts beset to counter its worst excesses, is characterised by *both* a 'creeping sense of reality as lost' and *also* a 'yearning for a lost reality' (Prosser 2005, 4). We live in 'a lost dream', as it were, or, at least, in 'a dream that is unravelling' (Harry Nankin, personal communication, 22 March 2022). This speech recalls Nankin's interest in Aldo Leopold, who associated beauty with ecological integrity, health, and stability (Leopold 1938; 1947; 1991; Gobster 1995). Nankin was once attracted to this idea as a feature of his own ecological aesthetics but concedes that Leopold's work is perhaps less relevant now in the age of the Anthropocene, where everything is unravelling. To do art responsibly today, he suggests, means embracing 'a tragic aesthetic' (Harry Nankin, personal

communication, 22 March 2022). To be 'modern'—and Nankin counts himself as inescapably so—is to live with a 'traumatic realism' (Foster 1996, 132)[36] in which the symbolic order itself is 'in crisis' (Foster 1996, 165) because the possibility of meaning between *the sign* and *the signified* has been shattered. All yearning, therefore, is inescapably marked by the indicia of trauma, tragedy, and the apprehension that the real, in Lacanian terms, is irretrievably lost to us and us to it.[37] Such tragedy, Nankin contends, 'confronts us with the paradox of our alienation':

> [W]e are captive of the very ecology that evolved our mortal minds free. The human remodelling of earthly nature, the anthropogenic undoing of what I call ecological nonhuman 'systems of selves' invokes a special kind of pathos. If and when we engage nonhumans as 'selves' we may, if only faintly, sense their essential predicament, albeit without hubris, as not unlike our own. We may feel the pathos of their entrapment in the natural order, their innocent fate, their unwitting sacrifice. In undertaking the triumphant remaking of the world in our image we are emptying it of wild and uneconomic non-human others. A world bereft of others, the non-human 'selves' that forever before delineated our humanity: an ontological tragedy in which the minds, experiences and very categories of otherness have been vanquished. This is what biodiversity collapse is. (Harry Nankin, personal communication, 22 June 2022)

One implication of this for creatives is that

> artists are drawn not to the highs of the simulacral image but to the lows of the depressive object. If some high modernists sought to transcend the referential figure and some early postmodernists to delight in the sheer image, some later postmodernists want to possess the real thing. (Foster 1996, 165)

Photography, as Barthes avers, offers no departure, no escape here (Barthes 1982, 90-91). It was not Barthes, however, but rather Terry Eagleton, Alfred Whitehead, Kate Rigby, and Garrett Hardin who first alerted Nankin to the possibility that nature itself might be appraised as 'the sacrificial scapegoat or tragic *pharmakos* of modernity' (Nankin 2015, 14).[38] Nankin believes that 'the concomitant decline in environmental alterity and stability threatens to cauterize the ecological identity of place' (Nankin 2010b, 94) and that this 'end of nature' (a term borrowed from Kate Soper) is nothing short of a 'tragedy' (see Nankin, 2015, 79-109). Reflecting on his use of the term 'tragedy', Nankin writes:

> Colloquially 'tragedy' describes any serious misfortune, but its stricter application applies to art of that name which in turn probably originated in the ritual sacrifice, 'scapegoat' or *pharmakos* of ancient Greece. The colonial 'sacrifice' of indigenous man [sic] and nature at Lake Tyrrell might be understood as tragic in the common and atavistic sense but the auguring of human suffering due to the contemporary elimination of non-human nature across the planet is also tragedy insofar as life imitates art. Here, the twin Aristotelian narrative elements of *anagnorisis* or 'recognition' (eg. realizing the impact of biological destruction) and *peripeteia* or 'reversal of

> circumstances' (eg. the slippage from ecological security to instability) may well describe the human condition in the face of global environmental crisis. (Nankin 2010b, 94-95)

Nankin recognises that, by its very nature, photography recalls 'what was once a future that became a present that is now a past that will never return.… The medium also operates as both an instrument of tragic ecological loss and a supreme communicator of that loss' (Prosser 2005, 1, as quoted in Nankin 2015, 94).[39] He associates ecological tragedy with the Greek idea of τραγωδία, where there is no 'programmed redemption', as in most monotheistic accounts of history. If there is redemption, it must come 'through other ways' (Harry Nankin, personal communication, 22 March 2022).

Examinination

Before concluding, it is necessary to examine whether Nankin's techniques achieve their stated aims. Several tensions emerge that warrant consideration.

First, the question of aestheticisation: While Nankin's cameraless photography explicitly seeks to avoid aestheticising the ecological crisis, his resulting images—with their dramatic chiaroscuro, abstract compositions, and haunting beauty—risk the very aestheticisation he aims to resist. The shadowgrams of bogong moths, for instance, possess an undeniable visual appeal that might inadvertently distance viewers from the ecological tragedy they index. Does the formal sophistication of the work undermine its ethical purpose, or does aesthetic power serve as a necessary vehicle for engaging audiences with difficult truths?

Second, the nature-technology relationship: Nankin's stated aim is to assist nature in writing its own photograph through indexical processes, yet the photographer's role as assistant remains substantial and inescapable. While cameraless photography reduces certain forms of mediation—eliminating the camera's monocular perspective and mechanical framing—human agency persists throughout. Decisions about which subjects to document, when and where to place photosensitive materials, how long to expose them, which resulting images to preserve, and how to present them all involve curatorial judgment and artistic interpretation. The question then becomes: to what extent does this approach genuinely assist nature's self-representation, and at what point does human assistance become human direction? Nankin's indexical method creates a more direct physical relationship between subject and image than conventional photography, yet whether this constitutes a meaningful shift from representation to co-creation remains open to debate.

Third, the question of repair: Does Nankin's work enact a form of *tikkun olam*, or is it primarily inspired by Kabbalistic principles? The distinction matters. To enact repair suggests that the artistic process itself participates in mending the world—perhaps by raising consciousness, fostering connection, or modelling alternative modes of attention. To be inspired by such principles

suggests something more modest: that the work gestures towards repair without claiming to achieve it. Nankin's indexical approach—allowing light and shadow to inscribe themselves on photosensitive surfaces—could be read as facilitating a form of partnership in which human intervention enables rather than dominates expression. Yet, the gap between conceptual framework and actual practice remains. The photographer still determines what becomes visible and how it is presented to viewers.

Fourth, the efficacy of connection: Nankin seeks to create meaningful connections with non-human subjects, to enter their *umwelten* and acknowledge their agency. But can enlarged shadowgrams of insects truly foster interspecies empathy, or do they remain aesthetic objects that keep viewers at a comfortable remove? The images may reveal 'surprising individuality' (Nankin 2013, 8), but do they enable genuine encounter with otherness, or do they domesticate that otherness through artistic transformation?

These questions do not in any way diminish the significance of Nankin's work but rather highlight the paradoxes inherent in any artistic engagement with ecological crises. Perhaps the most honest assessment is that his practice operates in the space between enactment and aspiration—attempting repair while acknowledging the limitations of any human gesture towards mending a fractured world. The work's value may lie precisely in its wrestling with these contradictions, modelling a mode of attention that is simultaneously hopeful and tragic, engaged and uncertain.

Conclusion

On the predicament of the tragic, Nankin's gaze is especially on the ecological, on the violence perpetrated against the landscape, the 'most evocative poetic expression' of which 'may yet be found among the abject and shadows' (Nankin 2015, 193). These are the icons of tragedy his work seeks to index. The effort to index such icons is not an attempt at any kind of mastery, however. It is, rather, among other things, a confession that the art of knowing involves a commitment to maintaining a relationship with ignorance, with unintelligibility (see Didi-Huberman 2005, 228; Kelsey 2015), with that which escapes us, and, as Giorgio Agamben reminds us, to 'allowing an absence of knowledge to guide and accompany our gestures, letting a stubborn silence clearly respond for our words'. The ways 'in which we are able to be ignorant', argues Agamben, are 'precisely what defines the rank of what we are able to know and that the articulation of a zone of nonknowledge is the condition—and at the same time the touchstone—of all our knowledge' (Agamben 2011, 114).

This, too, is among art's gifts; and it comes with risks. There exists always—and perhaps inescapably so in photography—the risk of further distancing the viewer from the subject of the work.[40] This is perhaps especially true when the subject is marked by a sense of tragedy. Photographs

can certainly 'document a suffering which arouses our indignation', but because photography tends to conform to 'surrealist standards of beauty', photographs also distance one from the tragedy itself (Sontag 1977, 94).[41] In an address delivered in Paris on 27 April 1934 at the Institute for the Study of Fascism, Walter Benjamin suggested that photography 'has succeeded in turning abject poverty itself, by handling it in a modish, technically perfect way, into an object of enjoyment' (Benjamin 1998, 95). This is especially a problem for moralists, who demand that a photograph speak,[42] and for utilitarians, who demand that the value of any particular piece of art lies not in itself but in its service to cultural, political, activist, or other ends (see Gablik 1991, 27). This, it seems, raises a particular—and probably inescapable—challenge also for an artist like Harry Nankin, whose work represents a reassertion of the gravity of meaning over technique, the possibility of congruence, however tentative, between the tacit and the uncontactable, the reaffirmation of the ontological connection *and* distinction between the simulated and the connate, and a commitment to attending to the world's abject subjects and highlighting the tragedy of ecological loss. Perhaps the more his work conforms (in the viewer's mind) to the orthodoxies of Surrealism—its avowed agnosticism and indifference vis-à-vis its subjects and its dismembering of inconvenient realities from the hard work of ethics—the less it can achieve its maker's stated aims.[43] But is there any escape from that?

For most of Nankin's career, he has considered his role as a vehicle rather than as a subject—the 'I' has been inconspicuous or peripheral. More recently, he has recognised that, pushed to its limits, this is neither possible nor desirable and that efforts to evade kinship between biography and making result in insipid and stolid work, work devoid of pathos. His work as an indexer of icons amid tragedy is partly an acknowledgement that we are both products and prisoners of the ecology that birthed our conscious minds. The human reshaping of ecosystems, dismantling systems of selves, evokes a subterranean grief. When humans view other species as conscious beings, we glimpse—or may glimpse—*their* fundamental struggle as that which we share.

In the above, I have suggested that central to Nankin's work is the notion of the photographer as an indexer of ecological icons, simultaneously documenting Earth's fractured and tragic nature while recognising something of its enduring hope and the possibility of repair. This recalls an idea close to Nankin's own sympathies; namely, the Kabbalist's appeal for *tikkun olam*, the repairing of the world.

Between 2007-23, Nankin undertook a project titled *Instructions for Mending the World*, for which he employed a carefully orchestrated two-stage process (see Figure 4: *Instructions for Mending the World 4 (Constellation Cygnus)*). First, he travelled to the dry bed of Lake Tyrrell, in Victoria's Mallee region, on moonless nights, placing sheets of photosensitive

photographic paper directly on the ground, exposing them for extended periods to starlight. Without any camera or lens, he allowed ancient light from deep space—photons that had travelled for millennia across the cosmos—to imprint themselves directly onto the silver halides in the photographic material, creating what might be understood as a direct physical trace of the universe itself. Second, in his darkroom studio, he created shadowgrams by exposing muslin fabric to artificial light, producing toned gelatin silver shadowgrams that captured the weave and texture of quotidian, earthly materials. Each artwork in the series consists of these paired images—one celestial, one terrestrial; one documenting cosmic vastness, the other domestic intimacy—housed together in Mylar envelopes as unique objects. The juxtaposition invites contemplation of the relationship between the infinite and the immediate, the eternal and the ephemeral.

Figure 4: Harry Nankin, *Instructions for Mending the World 4 (Constellation Cygnus)*, 2021. One en plein air starlight-exposed and one studio-made toned gelatin silver shadowgram film each in a Mylar envelope. Each film 33 x 20 cm. Unique objects. Artist's collection. Used with permission.

In this project, Nankin invited us to consider how the universe itself, its boundless space and countless stars, prompt reflection on the nature of repair: 'redemption' not for individuals but rather for the 'web of living and inanimate kin we share this precious blue orb with, and depend upon: vegetative, animal, fungi and microbe, sea and soil, stone, ice, river and air'. He continues:

> In Kabbalist cosmology, sensed reality is neither infinite nor eternal, unlike the *Ein sof* ('There is no end') which is the imagined invisible creative

> source of everything. Juxtaposed with each other, these shadows of quotidian and cosmic fabric provoke thoughts of that shared, ineffable wellspring. Which film in each piece constitutes the 'instructions' and which is for 'mending' is undefined, just as what distinguishes the why from the how of reality remains unknowable to us now, and probably always will. (Nankin n.d.-c)

Any analysis of how Nankin's work functions as a form of *tikkun olam* requires attending to both the conceptual and practical dimensions of his methods. The Kabbalistic concept suggests that the vessels meant to contain divine light shattered, scattering sparks throughout creation that await gathering and restoration. Nankin's indexical approach could be understood as a literal gathering of light, a material enactment of metaphysical principle. The act of attending to abject creatures, damaged landscapes, and threatened ecosystems becomes a form of recognition that parallels the Kabbalistic imperative to find and elevate the sacred sparks hidden in creation's broken fragments.

Yet, whether this constitutes repair or remains a meditation on irreparability is ambiguous. Nankin's images do not restore degraded ecosystems or revive extinct species; they witness, index, and memorialise. The repair they offer is perhaps epistemological and affective rather than material: they work to mend human perception, to restore awareness of interconnection, to repair the rupture between human consciousness and non-human reality. In this sense, the photographs function less as direct acts of ecological restoration than as what might be called 'preparatory repair'—a kind of *hakhshara* [preparation] that must precede and enable the material restoration of ecosystems by transforming how we see and relate to the more-than-human world.

The ambiguity is productive rather than problematic. Nankin's work embodies the Kabbalistic recognition that repair is ongoing, partial, and necessarily collective rather than individual or complete. Each shadowgram becomes both evidence of brokenness and preparatory participation in mending, simultaneously documenting rupture and enacting connection.

While Nankin's work represents a significant effort to assist nature in writing its own photograph, there is no escaping the fact that the reception of and response to that gift remains with nature's most convoluted creature for whom it is finally only in redemption, if anywhere, that the past might 'become citable in all its moments' (Benjamin 2007a, 254, 264).

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Endnotes

[1] 'Anthropocene porn' is my play on the idea of disaster porn to reference the critical employment of an idea present in environmental humanities and cultural theory to describe how the Anthropocene gets aestheticised, commodified, or turned into passive entertainment rather than spurring genuine concern or action. It is essentially a pejorative term for content that treats environmental destruction as voyeuristic spectacle.

[2] Nankin's first visit to Aotearoa New Zealand was in 1974 (aged 21-22), when he backpacked around the country for three months, *sans* camera. He returned again in 1981 (aged 28), during which time he was employed for two months as a drinks waiter at the Milford Hotel and he photographed the

area. The trees at Te Anau were Tasmanian Blue Gums, planted in the late nineteenth century, reputedly by gold prospectors from Australia.

[3] As an anonymous reviewer of an earlier draft of this essay helpfully pointed out to me, there is here a tension within Nankin's work that warrants examination. His early photography was significantly indebted to 'wilderness' discourses, which have been heavily critiqued and largely rejected in environmental humanities, not least for their erasure of Indigenous histories of active land care. As the American environmental historian William Cronon argues, the wilderness concept often overlooks millennia of Indigenous environmental stewardship. Cronon writes: 'The removal of Indians to create an "uninhabited wilderness"—uninhabited as never before in the human history of the place—reminds us just how invented, just how constructed, the American wilderness really is.… [T]here is nothing natural about the concept of wilderness. It is entirely a creation of the culture that holds it dear, a product of the very history it seeks to deny. Indeed, one of the most striking proofs of the cultural invention of wilderness is its thoroughgoing erasure of the history from which it sprang. In virtually all of its manifestations, wilderness represents a flight from history. Seen as the original garden, it is a place outside of time, from which human beings had to be ejected before the fallen world of history could properly begin. Seen as the frontier, it is a savage world at the dawn of civilization, whose transformation represents the very beginning of the national historical epic. Seen as the bold landscape of frontier heroism, it is the place of youth and childhood, into which men escape by abandoning their pasts and entering a world of freedom where the constraints of civilization fade into memory. Seen as the sacred sublime, it is the home of a God who transcends history by standing as the One who remains untouched and unchanged by time's arrow. No matter what the angle from which we regard it, wilderness offers us the illusion that we can escape the cares and troubles of the world in which our past has ensnared us' (Cronon 1996, 15-16). Similar arguments had been made much earlier by Aboriginal academics (see Jones 1969; Hallam 1975; Langton 1996a, 1996b, 1998), as well as by Judith Wright (see Wright, 1968, 2), who was alerted to this issue by her friend Oodgeroo Noonuccal. While Nankin subsequently moved well away from the aestheticisation of landscapes construed as 'wilderness', a tendency to value non-anthropogenic spaces can still be discerned, not least in his turn towards the sky (itself increasingly bearing traces of modern technologies and commercial interests). His statement about grasslands (cited later in this essay) may overlook the extent to which those grasslands were formerly carefully sustained in their immense biodiversity by Aboriginal burning practices, in the absence of which they degraded. As the forementioned anonymous reviewer pointed out to me, the issue at hand extends beyond solely decolonial concerns, engaging also profound ethical and religious questions regarding the appropriate role and purpose of

humanity within the broader ontological order. The concept of *tikkun olam*—which arguably shares significant affinities with an Aboriginal ethic of 'caring for Country'—suggests that human beings need not be understood as intrinsic agents of destruction or disruption within the natural world, but rather as integral participants in its ongoing emergence. This role confers upon humanity the responsibility to nurture, restore, and, where necessary, remediate the harm—often self-inflicted—that has befallen the environment. In the context of the Anthropocene, such ethical obligations are arguably intensified, underscoring the inadequacy of misanthropic responses. Nankin's *oeuvre* is underwritten by the conviction, however fragile, that a sufficient contingent of individuals might yet answer this call to repair the world—an invitation that is constitutive of his artistic and ethical project, despite his occasional acknowledgement of the tendency towards despair that such a task entails.

[4] On work undertaken at Lake Tyrrell and Mount Buffalo, see Nankin 2015, 110-88; Potter 2009. *Ekkyklêma* was a PhD project that has since been largely reiterated. The bogong moth films in *Ekkyklêma* have been recut and reassembled (with massive additions) into the seven-part *Moth Liturgy/A Thousand Years Deep* sequence; many of the Lake Tyrrell insect films in *Ekkyklêma* have been recut and included (along with other films) in the *The End of the Age of Entitlement* series; many of the human footprint films in *Ekkyklêma* have been recut and incorporated into the *Dancing on Mars* series. The monochrome *Minds in the Cave* prints still exist (in storage) but have been replaced by the re-made and fully colourised *Moth Liturgy* prints.

[5] This idea has a long history in modern art. See, especially, Kandinsky 1911; Rothko 2004. Cf. Lawson 2020, 109-18.

[6] Nankin 2006, 3.

[7] On the exalted claims vis-à-vis photography's revelatory powers, see Sontag 1977, 107-08; cf. Pfau 2022.

[8] There is a strong tradition in Australian writing about critical ecologies. See, for example, Turner 1987; Mulligan and Hill 2001; Wright 2006, 2023; Bobis 2015; McDougall, Ryan, and Reynolds 2022; cf. Robin 2008. Space here precludes what would no doubt be an interesting discussion—to trace the eco-sensitivities of such literature in dialogue with the work of visual artists such as Nankin, Badger Bates, Lauren Berkowitz, Diana Boyer, Lorraine Connelly-Northey, Nici Cumpston, Bonita Ely, Lucas Ihlein, Susan Norrie, Olegas Truchanas, and others. Here, see Moore 2007.

[9] Such are not, however, entirely distant from Nankin's concerns. See Nankin 2015, 22-26.

[10] See Nankin 2010b, 94. Nankin's construction owes some debt to Lacan 1973; Berger 1977; Soper 1995.

[11] *Nearamnew* was made in collaboration with Lab architecture studio and commissioned in 1999 by the Federation Square Public Art Program. See Rutherford 2005.

[12] Dzenis is here describing Nankin's *Wave* project, but the description appears apt for all Nankin's major projects: 'As performance, the work's creation is approached as a photokinetic, communal public ritual'.
[13] On which, see, for example, James 2015, 33-45. James's essay focuses on the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara peoples of the Western Desert.
[14] Nankin describes the process in detail in Nankin 2010b, 92-93. See also Nankin 2010a; 2015, 111.
[15] Nankin is aware of the importance of aesthetics in his work and of the ways that his work has increasingly been about attention to the beautiful, which he now conceives in terms of the tragic, and not with Kantian notions of the sublime or Leopoldian associations of beauty with health, about which he once was interested.
[16] Keith Jarrett suggests that this is, in fact, true of all art: 'Art exists as a reminder. All *true* art is a reminder of forgotten, or soon-to-be forgotten, relationships, whether it be God and man, man and woman, earth and humanity, color and form etc' (Keith Jarrett, liner notes to *Spirits*, ECM 1333/34, 1986, 33⅓ rpm).
[17] Nankin has also noted: 'Abandoning the camera allowed me to let go of the visual conventions of landscape and the acquisitive idea of image "capture", while engaging viscerally with natural phenomena absent, bypassed or suppressed by conventional remote and lens-based methods of reportage' (Harry Nankin, personal communication, 22 June 2022).
[18] Claudet's work was quite distinct insofar as he took as his light source '*moonlight*' and 'the *light of the stars!*' These, however 'distinct and beautiful', were, as judged by a well-known London correspondent, 'by no means as effective as those [photographs produced] from sunshine' (A Cosmopolitan 1846, 77). Other enthusiasts, channelling Plato, have claimed that daguerreotypes preserve 'the imprints of all that has existed alive, spread out through the diverse zones of infinite space' (Ernest Renan, as quoted in Davies 1998, 116). Cf: 'It may be supposed that all that which has existed still exists somewhere in an image that may be reanimated. The negatives of all things are kept. The stars at the extremity of the universe are receiving at the present time the image of facts which occurred centuries ago. The imprints of all that has existed live stationed at the various zones of infinite space. The supreme photographer has only to print from them new proofs' (*Journal des Débats*, 7 November 1884, as quoted in Petavel 1892, 67).
[19] For a brief history of cameraless photography, charting the pioneering work of Johann Heinrich Schulze, Elizabeth Fulhame, Thomas Wedgwood, Claude and Nicéphore Niépce, William Henry Fox Talbot, Louis Daguerre, Hercules Florence, John Herschel, Antoine Claudet, Léon Foucault, Blanche Shelley, Cecilia Glaisher, Louis Ducos du Hauron, Thomas Malone, Charles Daubigny, Jean-François Millet, Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot, Charles F. Himes, Herbert Dobbie, and others, see Batchen 2016, 6-15.

[20] Note Sontag's observation about the attraction for many photographers of using older technologies: '[A]s cameras get ever more sophisticated, more automated, more acute, some photographers are tempted to disarm themselves or to suggest that they are really not armed, and prefer to submit themselves to the limits imposed by a pre-modem camera technology—a cruder, less high-powered machine being thought to give more interesting or expressive results, to leave more room for the creative accident' (Sontag 1977, 110-11).

[21] On Talbot's work, see Schaaf 1992, 2000; Maimon 2015; Roberts and Hobson 2016; Leers and Schaaf 2017. Of course, 'in the present, photographic images have lost almost any authority to act as proof of anything. Doubt is the default mode of reception' (Steyerl 2022, 197). See also Morris 2014; Stallabrass 2020.

[22] *Cyanotypes of British and Foreign Ferns* (1853) and *Cyanotypes of British and Foreign Flowering Plants and Ferns* (1854) are both available in The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, USA.

[23] *The British Ferns: Represented in a Series of Photographs from Nature by Mrs Glaisher*, remained an unpublished project undertaken in c. 1955 between Glaisher and the entomologist and publisher Edward Newman. See also Glaisher 1855; Marten 2002.

[24] William Henry Fox Talbot, *Dandelion Seeds*, 1858 or later. Photogravure, 10.5 x 7.6 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, USA. See Maimon 2015.

[25] The work of British artist Susan Derges stands out for her environmental photograms depicting rivers, water cycles, amphibians, and other natural phenomena. Derges creates these images by immersing photographic paper directly into bodies of water during the exposure process. Similarly, New Zealand artist Anne Noble explores ecological concerns through cameraless approaches in her 2015-17 series *Bruissement*, producing photograms of dead bees to evoke the fragility and aesthetic significance of these essential pollinators. Positioning Nankin within this broader field highlights shared preoccupations with indexicality, ecological presence, materiality, and the capacity of photography to register natural processes and non-human subjects in the absence of a camera's intervening optics.

[26] Nankin's 'Earthwave Project', as documented in *THE WAVE Theoria Sacra Undarum (The Sacred Theory of the Wave)* series (1996-97), consists of possibly the only, and almost certainly the largest, marine ecological shadowgrams ever captured *en plein air*. It was gifted to the National Gallery of Victoria. For engagement with the project, see Dzenis 1997, 6; Murray 1997; Calado 1998, 54-55, 452-56, 527-28; Millner 1999, 173-74; Rigby 2004, 434-37. Not all reviewers were impressed with the project (see, for example, McDonald 1997), and others suggest that nature's challenges resulted in the project's failure to live up to the artist's expectation (see Cuthbert 2000, 7-8, 17, 25). The project's subtitle parodies Thomas

Burnet's *Telluris Theoria Sacra* (1681), which later influenced Edmund Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757).

[27] See, for example, Harry Nankin, *Of Great Western Tears / Duet 2*, 2006. Gelatin silver photogram, (a-b) 107.1 x 214.3 cm. National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne.

[28] 'The truth is that we need invertebrates but they don't need us. If human beings were to disappear tomorrow, the world would go on with little change.… But if invertebrates were to disappear, I doubt that the human species could last more than a few months' (Wilson 1987, 345). See also Carson 2002.

[29] Nankin cites this text twice (Nankin 2015, 109; 2016, 21).

[30] The characterisation of insects as universally relegated to the status of the overlooked and abject is not consistently applicable across all cultures. Notably, bees and butterflies are exceptions in many cultural traditions, including those in Europe, where honeybees have been historically associated with various deities and, later, saints. Moreover, the bogong moth holds significant value in Aboriginal cultures. See, for example, Rigby 2011.

[31] Nankin suggests that 'the iconic status of the Bogong Moth resists their default abjection but does not eliminate it' (Nankin 2015, 174).

[32] This assessment may be overoptimistic. See Langer 1944, 152.

[33] On Nankin's engagement with Peircean semiotics, see Nankin 2010b, 95; 2015, 43-44, 65, 70. Also Brunet 1996. Cf.: 'Photographs … drift between the shores of perception, between sign and image, without ever approaching either' (Jean-Paul Sartre, as quoted in Barthes 1982, 19, 20). See Shawcross 1997, 1-24; Elkins 2003.

[34] On this distinction, see Panofsky 1972, 3. Nankin is not unaware that 'the semiotics of representation, the connection between the *referent*, its *sign* and what is *signified*' is both 'weakened by postmodernism's uncovering of the contingency of signification' and 'complicated by the simultaneous unfamiliarity and intimacy of cameraless procedures' (Nankin 2015, 71). See also Barthes 1982, 4, 34, 45, 51, 76.

[35] Cf. Eliot 2014, 112: 'And [the poet] is not likely to know what is to be done unless he [sic] lives in what is not merely the present, but the present moment of the past, unless he is conscious, not of what is dead, but of what is already living.'

[36] Foster qualifies his use of this phrase: '[T]here can be no traumatic realism as such. Nonetheless, it is useful as a heuristic notion—if only as one way out of the stalemated oppositions of new art history (semiotic versus social-historical methods, text versus context) and cultural criticism (signifier versus referent, constructivist subject versus naturalist body)' (Foster 1996, 261-62n10).

[37] 'The crucial point here', as Slavoj Žižek observes, with Lacanian gloss, 'is the changed status of an event: when it erupts for the first time it is experienced as a contingent trauma, as an intrusion of a certain nonsymbolized Real; only through repetition is this event recognized in its symbolic necessity—it finds its place in the symbolic network; it is realized in the symbolic order' (Žižek 1989, 61).

[38] Nankin mentions the following work as being particularly germane here: Whitehead 1925; Hardin 1968; Eagleton 2003b; Rigby 2007. Specifically, it was Eagleton's *Sweet Violence* that alerted Nankin to the tragic mode and to the notion of sacrifice/*pharmakos*, which he then considered as 'Nature'. A phone discussion with his friend Kate Rigby (around 2003) alerted Nankin to Rigby's own coincidental thinking (as yet then unpublished) along the same lines. Nankin spoke with Rigby about his ideas again sometime in 2006. She was struck by how they reminded her of those of an academic acquaintance, Tim Morton (who had completed his PhD under Eagleton), as expressing ideas that resonate with earlier eco-feminist arguments like those made by, for example Val Plumwood. See Plumwood, 1993, 2002. Rigby encouraged Nankin to look out for Morton's then forthcoming *Ecology without Nature* (2007).

[39] To be sure, Nankin does not believe that this is something photography alone is capable of attending to: 'To properly access the tragic character of the ecological on the one hand and find momentary solace in the cathartic resolution of its tragedy on the other, we need an aesthetically rewarding, formally structured vicarious allusion to ecological tragedy. This is the role of literature, theatre and art' (Harry Nankin, personal communication, 22 June 2022).

[40] This distancing is not unrelated to Elkins's suggestion that 'as an art, photography insistently gives us the pain and the boredom of seeing, and the visual desperation that can follow: *camera dolorosa*' (Elkins 2007, 22).

[41] Cf. Sontag 1977, 21: 'The knowledge gained through still photographs will always be some kind of sentimentalism, whether cynical or humanist. It will be a knowledge at bargain prices—a semblance of knowledge, a semblance of wisdom; as the act of taking pictures is a semblance of appropriation, a semblance of rape.… [P]hotography makes us feel that the world is more available than it really is.'

[42] Benjamin suggested that this problem may be partly overcome if writers take photographs themselves. Where this is not possible, writers 'must demand from the photographer' an accompanying caption so that the picture might be 'rescue[d] … from the ravages of modishness' and have 'confer[red] upon it a revolutionary use value' (Benjamin 1998, 95; cf. Gribbin 2022). However, as Sontag argued so persuasively: '[E]ven an entirely accurate caption is only one interpretation, necessarily a limiting one, of the photograph to which it is attached. And the caption-glove slips on and off so easily. It cannot prevent any argument or moral plea which a

photograph (or set of photographs) is intended to support from being undermined by the plurality of meanings that every photograph carries, or from being qualified by the acquisitive mentality implicit in all picture-taking—and picture-collecting—and by the aesthetic relation to their subjects which all photographs inevitably propose. Even those photographs which speak so laceratingly of a specific historical moment also give us vicarious possession of their subjects under the aspect of a kind of eternity: the beautiful' (Sontag 1977, 97). This is especially the case, Sontag argues, in consumerist societies, wherein any distress or moral action that an image might otherwise occasion is quickly neutralised. See Sontag 1977, 98, 100.
[43] This risk, as Sontag also avers, is further heightened by the contexts in which an artist's work is made public—designated art spaces, or essays and reports, for example. See Sontag 1977, 94-95.