

SCOPE

Contemporary Research Topics

art & design 24:

August 2023

Artist's Page

<https://doi.org/10.34074/scop.1024002>

A PRIMORDIAL TOUCH

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Published by Otago Polytechnic Press.
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*We are unthinkable without fungi, yet seldom do we think about them.
It is an ignorance we can't afford to sustain.*

Merlin Sheldrake¹



Figure 1. Field study of dung fungi.

At the initial presenter evening for "Art and Air," the 2022 Art+Science event, scientists shared snippets of their research while artists described their practice. This would lead to collaborations and pairings, with the end result being an exhibition at the Dunedin Community Gallery. I was struck by Professor David Orlovich's research on mycorrhizal fungi. He spoke passionately about these intricate systems that provide an essential link between plants, enabling them to communicate, share nutrients and defend themselves against pests and diseases. He warned that without mycorrhizal fungi many of the world's ecosystems would not function. During his presentation, my mind wandered, thinking about the broader implications of studying and understanding this specific kind of fungi, both in terms of ecology and potentially in other fields as well. I reached out to David with the intention of learning more about these invisible networks and attempting to represent this communication photographically.

The first meeting with David led to conversations about local habitats for mycorrhizal fungi, restrictions and permits on collecting and the abundance of dung fungi in New Zealand. I wanted to start from scratch, so I also quizzed him about the most reliable way to clone and grow mycelium from a fruiting body collected in the field. My foray into the kingdom of fungi was almost too overwhelming for anything productive to happen. Attention was firmly focussed on the forest floor where common bonnets led to lichen-covered logs, which in turn directed my awareness to some uplifted soil which revealed a thick web of mycelium – a momentary glimpse of the vast underground network. For here, in this hidden realm, there was a sense of interconnectedness and mystery that seemed to transcend the boundaries of the visible world. An abrupt gust of wind snapped me out of this new way of ecological thinking, as I returned to a standing position. But the intermission was cut short as I noticed some animal scat at eye level, balancing delicately on a leaf blade with fungi sprouting from it (Figure 1). I was in deep now and there was no turning back. Failure to acknowledge my participation in this ecosystem would be detrimental not only to the project, but also to my developing understanding of the natural world.



Figure 2. Enlarged agar plate and photogram, gelatin silver print.

My first attempts at cultivating and isolating mycelium could be regarded as beginner's luck. The intriguing layers of growth piqued my interest, prompting me to use the agar plate as a negative and enlarge the progress onto fibre-based paper as silver gelatin prints in a darkroom environment (Figure 2). While the initial results were satisfying, they were more akin to snapshots. I was eager to facilitate a longer duration and greater change through a prolonged exposure, aligning with Henry Fox Talbot's photogenic drawings, which he described as nature's magic self-manifestations and as images making themselves.² However, I encountered difficulties with accepting the separation between the mycelium and the paper, because it lacked the indexical quality or trace that I was after. These ruminations led me to contemplate the collaboration between Man Ray and Marcel Duchamp in the photographic image *Dust Breeding* (1920). This image saw Man Ray point his camera at Duchamp's work-in-progress, *The Large Glass* (1915-23), which consisted of a sheet of glass accumulating dust in his studio. After releasing the shutter, they left for lunch and returned an hour or so later to stop the exposure. *Dust Breeding* continues to spark debates regarding the medium's status concerning index and authorship, and its appearance in exhibitions of abstraction and landscape imagery. Although *Dust Breeding* is a lens-based image, as opposed to my cameraless attempts, I'm drawn to the multiple interpretive layers, as David Campany explains: "In this single photograph there is an exploration of duration, an embrace of chance, spatial uncertainty, confusion of authorship and ambiguity of function."³

Somewhere, nestled between Macandrew Bay and Portobello, lies a forest remnant boasting an array of diverse broadleaf and other native trees. A friend residing on the property kept me updated with new fungi sightings throughout the year, aware of my ongoing project. On one occasion, he notified me of a rotund mushroom displaying a striking purple hue on its cap. This observation stood out to me, as David's initial presentation included a slide underscoring the significance of purple and its frequent occurrence within mycorrhizal fungi. That night, I ventured into the forest to collect the purple mushroom. As I made my way through the woods, only the occasional calls of restless korimako could be heard. Upon arriving at the mushroom's location, I buried some unexposed colour 4x5 film directly under where the fruiting body had been observed. With a handful of mycelium-rich soil and a freshly obtained fruiting body, I observed the surrounding trees and noticed a prevalence of k nuka and k tukutuku in that specific area. Once back home, I began the process of cleaning the collected specimen, cloning it and transferring it several times. Eventually, I began to see clean growth on some of the plates. Upon sharing my findings with David, he confirmed it as an ectomycorrhizal mushroom belonging to the genus *Russula*, most likely utilising the k nuka as its host.

Previously, the image made in the darkroom was shaped through the mediation of a lens from an enlarger. Bypassing this step, and in complete darkness, I transferred the growing mycelium directly from the sterile conditions of a petri dish onto several sheets of colour film. This move favoured the medium's light-sensitive surface over the lens or the shutter, invoking Rosalind E Krauss's concept of the medium's "essential form."⁴ After safely storing the film in light-proof bags and leaving it to interact for a month, I observed how my thoughts were constantly drawn back to the slow exposure that was taking place. I envisioned vivid magentas and microscopic highways reaching in all directions across the film surface. These thoughts continued throughout the night and made me question if, through this facilitation, I had unwittingly become a host.

During this time, I also reflected on my fascination with the latent image of photography and drew connections with death. Both involve a process of transformation that occurs beyond immediate perception. In photography, the latent image refers to the invisible image created on light-sensitive material when it is exposed to light or, in this case, a living organism touching the surface directly. This image remains hidden until it is developed, revealing a visible resemblance of the original subject. Similarly, death involves a transformation of the physical body into a state that is not immediately perceptible. The deceased body may appear unchanged, but the life force has departed, leaving behind only an empty vessel. Furthermore, both the latent image and death involve a sense of impermanence and transience. The latent image is temporary and fleeting, existing only until it is developed into a visible image. Similarly, death marks the end of physical existence and the beginning of a new state of being, as part of the natural cycle of



Figure 3. *Russula 1*, C Type print on Kodak Endura Metallic Paper: 800x600mm.

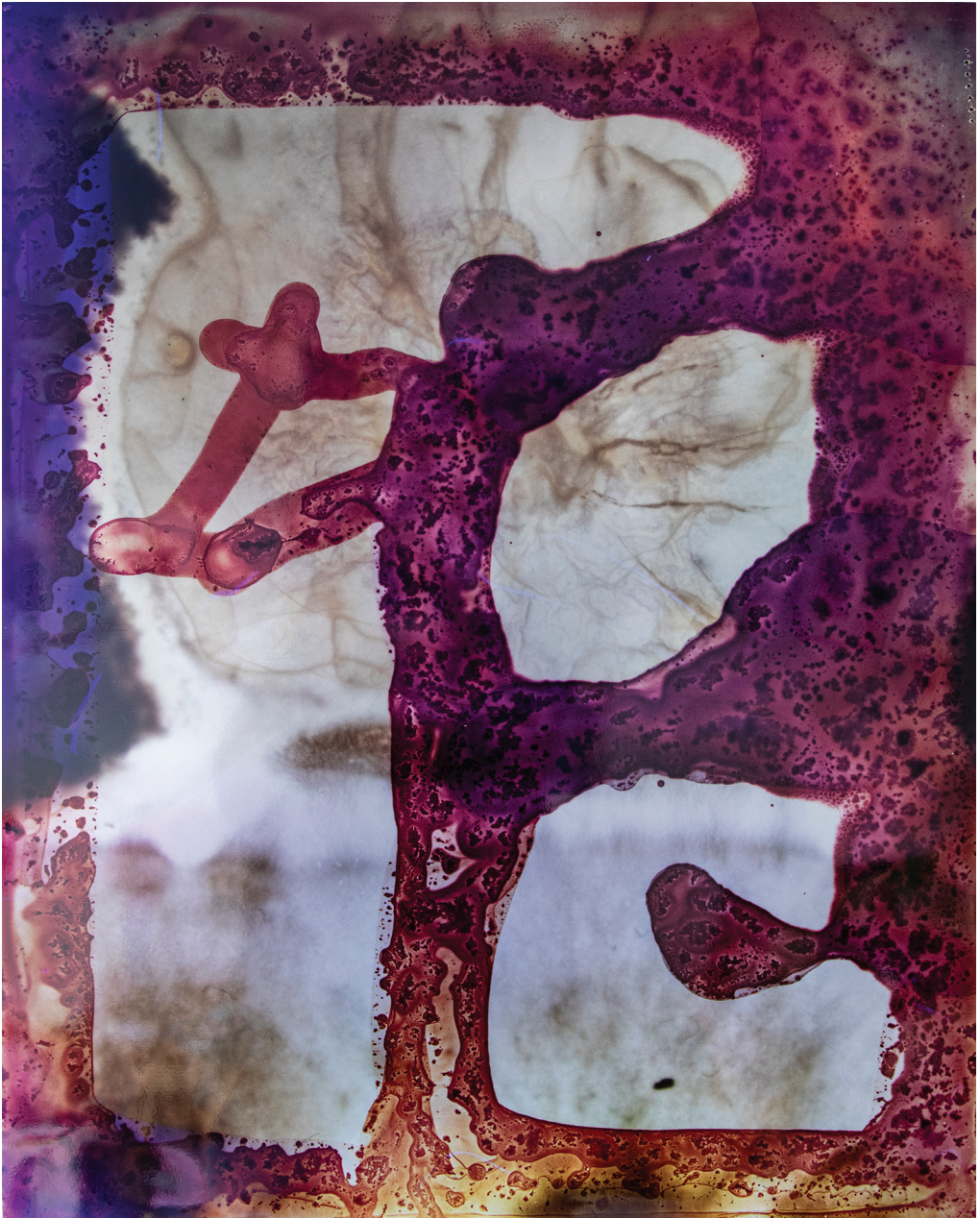


Figure 4. *Russula 2*, C Type print on Kodak Endura Metallic Paper; 800x600mm.

decay and rebirth. Returning to the mycelium, mycologist Paul Stamets states in his 2005 book *Mycelium Running*, "Fungi are the interface organisms between life and death."¹⁵ In this project, the mycelium is acting as a mediator between the living and the dead, between the visible and the latent, embodying the impermanence and transience that exist in both photography and life itself.

With the help of the Sydney-based master printer, Sandra Bernard, the resulting images were brought to life. I was fortunate that she still had Kodak Endura metallic paper stock available, which provided a depth and exaggerated the purple tones, creating an almost wet appearance to the overall image (Figures 3, 4). The images were framed and laid flat on plinths at knee height. This decision was made not only to imitate the experience of looking down at a forest floor, but also to allow children to get closer to the intricate details present in the final images, which was especially important given the planned school visits to the exhibition.

Through this project I've developed a new fascination with how mycorrhizal fungi act as a vital connection between plants, allowing them to thrive and communicate with each other. Similarly, through cameraless photography I can see how these images serve as a connection between myself and the natural world. By using unconventional techniques like propagating mycelium onto film, I've been able to facilitate images that reflect the interconnectedness of nature and showcase an intricate beauty of often-overlooked organisms like fungi. This collaboration has opened new opportunities to continue to explore hidden networks that underpin the world around us and potentially uncover new forms of communication and understanding.

Thomas Lord (ORCID ID <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1486-7521>) is a current MFA candidate while also working as a Lecturer in the photography studio at the Dunedin School of Art. He has held exhibitions in painting where nostalgia, ecology and an exploration into different modes of time form a common thread between the two media.

- 1 Merlin Sheldrake, "Why the Hidden World of Fungi is Essential to Life on Earth," *The Guardian*, 10 October 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/oct/10/hidden-world-fungi-life-earth> (accessed 9 March 2023).
- 2 Armin Zweite, *Hiroshi Sugimoto: Revolution* (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2013), 23.
- 3 David Campany, "Man Ray and Marcel Duchamp: *Dust Breeding* 1920," <https://davidcampany.com/dust-breeding-man-ray-1920/> (accessed 7 March 2023).
- 4 David Campany, *A Handful of Dust* (London: Mack Books, 2017), 28. Krauss argues that the "essential form" of photography is not located in its representational content, but in its ability to reveal the physical characteristics of the medium itself, such as light, surface and chemical processes.
- 5 Paul Stamets, *Mycelium Running: How Mushrooms Can Help Save the World* (New York: Ten Speed Press, 2005), 17.