

Reflection

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SUSTAINABILITY: REFLECTIONS ASSOCIATED WITH WATER

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In *Designing for Sustainability* Nathan Stegall identifies that a sustainable society requires a philosophy that can be seen as a “hierarchy of four interconnected, hierarchal components: a philosophy of resources, a philosophy of form and function, a philosophy of purpose, and a philosophy of spirit... At the top of the hierarchy is an encompassing philosophy of spirit; the fundamental goal that we hope to accomplish through design.”¹ While David Orr describes this encompassing new spirit as “driven by the sense of wonder, the sheer delight in being alive in a beautiful, mysterious, bountiful world.”² This philosophy of spirit is the driving force behind ecological sustainability rather than supporting a purely economical sustainability, and nowhere is this more inherent and more divisive than our relationship to life in the world’s oceans. To rethink our relationship to oceanic things by stepping outside our normal understanding of them, experiencing them with a sense of ecstatic, post-phenomenological wonder; such an approach may be a way of developing our understanding towards this important new philosophy.

Thirty years on from Orr’s *Ecological Literacy* the oceans are on the brink of a new form of industrial exploitation in the form of ocean floor mining, whose impact upon deep sea ecologies is unknown and the emergent industry currently without regulation.³ As Orr indicated then, “the crisis of sustainability, the fit between humanity and its habitat, is manifest in varying ways and degrees everywhere on earth. It is not only a permanent feature on the political agenda; for all practical purposes, it is the agenda... Sustainability is about the terms and conditions of human survival...”⁴

*Along the Waterline: Cameraless Photography and the Nocturnal Register of Seaborne Activity*⁵ was a practice based photographic research project exploring my relationship with the nocturnal ocean while living aboard a sailing vessel in and around Te Whanganui-a-Tara/Wellington and Tōtaranui/Queen Charlotte Sounds. My relationship with sailing is even longer than my relationship with photography. My father introduced me to sailing as a young boy on the northwest coast of England and I since have sailed in many different parts of the world. Photography I picked up as a teenager and when I moved to New Zealand I studied for a Master’s degree in Photography at the School of Art, Otago Polytechnic while teaching photography in Southland Institute of Technology. I moved to Wellington to do a PhD in cameraless photography and at the same time wanted to live on a boat. It took me a while to realise I could bring the two practices together. I had developed an interest in cameraless photography

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- 1 Nathan Stegall, “Designing for Sustainability: A Philosophy for Ecologically Intentional Design.” *Design Issues* Vol. 22, No. 2 (Spring, 2006), 56–63 (8 pages)
 - 2 Orr, *Ecological Literacy Education and the Transition to a Postmodern World* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 86.
 - 3 James Conca “Seafloor Mining for Critical Metals: A Brilliant Idea or Another Environmental Catastrophe.” *Forbes*. February 11, 2022. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/jamesconca/2022/02/11/seafloor-mining-for-rare-metals--a-brilliant-idea-or-another-environmental-catastrophe/?sh=58bc9ddc7719> “United States has not ratified the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), so we are not part of negotiations on regulations governing seabed mining.”
 - 4 Orr, *Ecological Literacy* 83.
 - 5 Kevin Miles, *Along the Waterline: Cameraless Photography and the Nocturnal Register of Seaborne Activity*. PhD Exegesis, Massey University, Wellington, NZ. (2022)

while teaching darkroom techniques and finding it appearing as a contemporary art form. The environment of the boat created possibilities for recording both light-sensitivity and chemical sensitivity towards the conditions of the sea in my images.

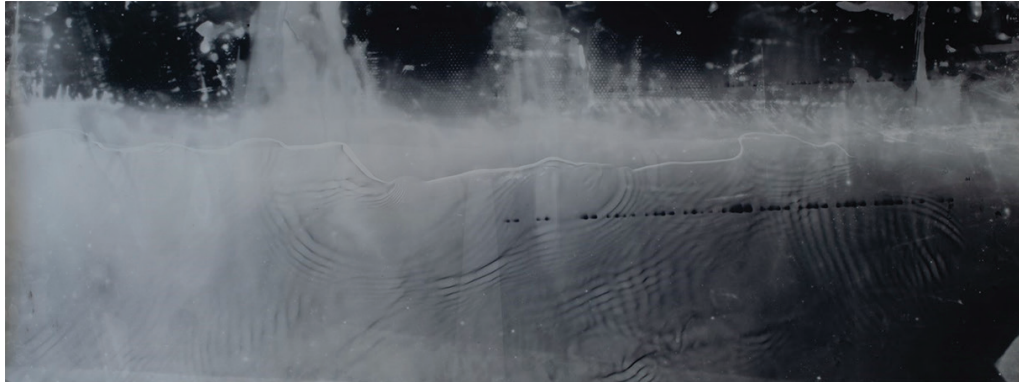


Figure 1. Te Whanganui-a-Tara (2021). Unique gelatin silver photograph. 46 x 106 cm. Source: Author

The 'cameraless' image shown in Figure 1 was produced at night at the waterline of the hull in various anchorages in the region. As the term suggests, cameraless images are produced entirely without a camera or lens and depend instead on analogue photosensitive materials (film or paper) coming into direct contact with, in my case, seaborne objects and seawater and exposure to ambient light. This fundamental yet tactile use of photochemistry is an odd thing to consider as a representation of the subjectivity that photography normally offers us. The familiar humanistic position through the use of optical perspective of lens and framing of the camera is abandoned by cameraless photography, which instead forces the viewer to confront another subjectivity registered through a tactile response to the chemistry and physics of the world. The strange shadow-like photographic trace, forces the viewer to step outside of their familiar understanding of the things depicted. This process of defamiliarisation has the potential to shift the viewer's humanistic tendency toward the primacy of vision, to the tactile surface of the object or the flux of materiality rendered as a haptic photographic image.

My interpretation of the United Nations Sustainability Development Goal: *Life Below Water* looks through a lens of spirituality, toward a philosophy of spirit. I support the belief and conviction that we must engage with the sea in ways less familiar to us, considering co-forming notions of phenomena and experience of the ocean as place of wonder and mystery. Through a practice of co-existence, involving contemplation of material, non-material, living and spiritual aspects of the sea as place, we can hopefully develop a truly sustainable relationship to the ocean, to everything in it and around it.

Along the Waterline draws on the strand of ecstatic-poetic phenomenology developed by Jennifer Gosetti-Ferencei. In her book *The Ecstatic Quotidian*⁶ As Jennifer Gosetti-Ferencei demonstrates, modernist writers and artists from Walter Benjamin to Cy Twombly⁷ examined modernity in its relation to quotidian life, which

6 Jennifer Gosetti-Ferencei, *The Ecstatic Quotidian: Phenomenological Sightings in Modern Art and Literature*. (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007).

7 In her book, *The Ecstatic Quotidian*, Gosetti-Ferencei gives the example of Benjamin's essays on "the nature of toys and their relation to the transformation of the everyday world" (p. 58) and I will add his references to the 'optical unconscious' in *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (<https://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/benjamin.pdf>) and *A Little History of Photography*. Cy Twombly's blackboard painting, *Untitled*, 1970, simulates trompe l'oeil, a technique that tricks the eye and its perception of objects. Typically, trompe l'oeil portrays ordinary objects of everyday use in the environment exposing our susceptibility to fallible perception.

was seen to harbour a latent ecstasis, or transformation, by 'stepping outside' familiar perception. My research explores the aesthetic-ecstatic potential of cameraless photography, not as a critique of 'the everyday' as a concern, but as a retro-modernist application of photography's potential to defamiliarise and thus illuminate.

As part of my studio practice as a PhD candidate, I wrote anecdotal accounts of passages and anchorages to inform the poetics of my photographic work through close analysis of my experience on the sea. These short texts focusing on the immediacy of experience appeared at various points in my exegesis to help maintain the reader's focus on a methodology of lived practice. An example of this anecdotal style of writing follows.

Coming to the Surface

It is Christmas Day morning 2020. We need to cast off from the marina at 2.00 am to catch the tide across the strait. We are meant to go with another boat, but they don't show, so we set off anyway. Out of the marina and away from the lights of the city and port, it suddenly becomes very dark. There is low cloud obscuring any light from the sky, but small navigation lights dance in the dark ahead. I am aware of their positions and significance, but it is so dark I am suddenly disoriented. I doubt my judgment, the chart plotter, my own eyes. You have to take it all in, remember what each light means and in the order in which you see them. Looking again, I see the pattern, get my bearings, and am back on course. We pass the channel markers, slowly edging towards the harbour mouth. Dark land mass looms either side of us. Senses become strained, but really, it is all about planning and following a course. So this is what we do. We pass the treacherous Te Tangihanga-o-Kupe/Barretts Reef as widely as we can afford to, heading into the middle of the channel as we approach Te Moana-o-Raukawa/Cook Strait. It is now around 3.30 am. As each minute passes, we become more vulnerable as we head toward what appears to be a black hole ahead, out into the notorious stretch of water. The two light houses of Te Raeakiaki/Pencarrow Head and the more distant Ōrua-Pouanui/Baring Head flicker into view on the east side of Te Whanganui-a-Tara, their beams stretch south and west into the darkness of the strait. For safety, we head out away from land rather than hugging the coastline. Time passes but the lighthouses still seem to be in the same position. We must be going against the tidal currents. Did I calculate correctly? My heart races as we slew across a particularly large swell. The darkness becomes palpable, pressing closer from all sides as if you could reach out and touch it. I feel breathless, as if the air had been sucked out of my lungs. It's like we have somehow sailed into a small dark pocket. Eyes straining, I grip the wheel and try to concentrate on the immediate surroundings, the engine's tone and the hiss of the swell as it passes by building from the south. The tidal current confirms my calculations and I am somewhat comforted by this. Our GPS chart plotter indicates we should alter course to the west in thirty minutes.

My partner is huddled down and staring forlornly out to sea. It is her first night sail and to be doing this with just the two of us suddenly seems like madness. I reassure myself that, as planned, it will not be long before the dawn breaks and all we need do is steer straight and sure. We get the flask out and drink some hot black coffee with biscuits. Feeling warmer now. Listening to the engine rise and fall. The VHF radio crackles briefly. It is 4.30 am and still pitch black. Finally, the beam of the lighthouses recedes as we roll with the tides, increasing speed now to five knots or more. Ahead in the distance, I see the navigation lights of one of the Cook Strait ferries coming towards us, on its way to Wellington port. The air feels warmer as we gybe slightly more downwind, heading northwards up Raukawa/Cook Strait towards the mouth of Tory Channel/Kura Te Au. The boat rolls a bit more on the swell. It keeps me busy at the helm. The ferry passes us half a mile away towards the coast, increasing our sense of isolation. However, we are safer here beyond the tidal rips and whirlpools. At least, that is our hope.

Almost imperceptibly, something is starting to change. The world emerges from the liquid night, like a latent image appearing on exposed photographic paper in darkroom development processes. I remember

Teju Cole's analogy between Tomas Tranströmer's poetic imagery, and the emergent direct contact print made in the photochemical darkroom, the latent image, where "the sense is of the sudden arrival of what was already there, as when a whale comes up for air: massive, exhilarating and evanescent."⁸ Slowly we make out waves further ahead and... yes all around. The space around us is expanding as the darkness recedes. It's easier to breathe now, like we have passed from a narrow tunnel, through a cave, and now into something more cavernous. I look up and the sky has become darkish grey, the first inkling of dawn. Immediately, our spirits are raised. We sigh with some relief. Later, as the sun emerges from the horizon bringing colour to the world, a pod of dolphins welcomes us, riding the bow wave, coming alongside so close we could almost touch them.

We turn to the ocean itself: to its three-dimensional and turbulent materiality, and to encounters with that materiality, in order to explore how thinking *with* the sea, can assist in reconceptualising our geographical understandings... a *wet ontology* not merely to endorse the perspective of a world of flows, connections, liquidities, and becomings, but also... a means by which the sea's material and phenomenological distinctiveness can facilitate the reimagining and reenlivening [sic] of a world ever on the move.⁹

Philip Steinberg and Kimberley Peters engage with "the growing numbers of human geographers who are turning away from the plane geometry of points, lines, and areas that have long grounded the discipline,"¹⁰ including Doreen Massey,¹¹ who challenges several of the more denigrating theories that have been written around oceanic space. The various flat-ontologies that "abolishes the notion of scale and replaces places with sites," and theories of volume which "have sought to reanimate space as both context and site of politics by emphasising its verticality, its materiality, and its temporality,"¹² are found to be lacking in an account of "the chaotic but *rhythmic* turbulence of the material world."¹³ In Steinberg's and Peter's text, they thoroughly dismantle some of the *dismissals* of the ocean in political theory, particularly Carl Schmitt's *The Nomos of The Earth*,¹⁴ in which he perceives the ocean from an immaterial, unknowable, and consequently 'insubstantial' perspective compared with the land. In his earlier work *Land and Sea*,¹⁵ Schmitt is less dismissive, "identifying a substantive logic of the ocean, as well as the other three fundamental elements – earth, air and fire,"¹⁶ in what is described by one commentator as a work of 'mytho-poesis'. In *Land and Sea*, Schmitt "draws on the works of Herman Melville, Jules Michelet, and others to identify the ocean as a contentious space of power conflict among humans as well as between humans and nature.

In addition to Schmitt, Steinberg and Peters draw our attention to other viewpoints that are also dismissive of the ocean as a meaningful space, citing both Claude Lévis Strauss (1973) and Roland Barthes (1972). For these thinkers, the ocean is "a space rendered ideologically and physically insignificant in reference to sociocultural and geopolitical concerns."¹⁷ However, in their article, Steinberg and Peters dispute these ideas with those of Michael Serres and others, who repudiate such denigrations of oceanic space. Instead, they view the ocean as a complex

8 Teju Cole, *Known and Strange Things*, (New York: Random House, 2016), 37.

9 Philip Steinberg and Kimberley Peters, "Wet Ontologies, Fluid Spaces: Giving Depth to Volume through Oceanic Thinking," in *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 33 (2015): 248

10 Steinberg and Peters, "Wet Ontologies, Fluid Spaces": 248.

11 Doreen Massey, *For Space* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2004).

12 Steinberg and Peters, 248.

13 Steinberg and Peters, 248.

14 Carl Schmitt, *The Nomos of the Earth in the International Law of the Jus Publicum Europaeum*. (New York: Telos, 2003).

15 Carl Schmitt, *Land and Sea* (San Diego, CA: Counter Currents, 2014).

16 Steinberg and Peters, 249.

17 Steinberg and Peters, 249.

phenomenon and a vital arena for our understanding of place. For myself, this is also an opportunity for the contemplation of the spiritual aspects of experience that life below water may present.

Further contention of the quotidian ocean is explicated through Jonathon Raban's analysis of wave formation in *A Passage to Juneau: A Sea and its Meanings*,¹⁸ in which he describes the shaping of waves and the ocean's movement from his observations aboard a boat while on a voyage between Seattle and Juneau. This account of the author's solo journey, aboard a ten-metre sailing yacht, brings us a concept of the ocean from a maritime perspective, which recognises and alludes to the sea as a three-dimensional, atmospheric form. While acknowledging the ontology of land-based, or 'dry,' concepts of space, a 'wet ontology' such as Steinberg's and Peter's forces us to recognise that the sea "presents us with a space that is emergent through a particular co-composition of matter and forces. In turn, this hydro-elemental assemblage allows us to rethink motion and matter and how it shapes the world as we know it."¹⁹ Steinberg and Peters continue to address this through a maritime lens in the human geographical practice and relational research of Jon Anderson, and his interest in the activities of kayaking and surfing. Anderson discusses these activities in terms of convergences with the ocean and describes how the 'surfing wave' can be understood as a relational place. Generally, this is expressed through an intimate and intense connection to the sea and swell, or more specifically, "those who actually engage the ocean, like sailors and, perhaps more profoundly, surfers and swimmers, become one with the waves as the waves become one with them, in a blend of complementarity and opposition."²⁰

Steinberg's, Peters' and Anderson's provocative appeal to wet ontologies requires us to "go beyond considering matter as static substance and leads us to consider the various ways in which matter changes physical state as it moves through, and simultaneously constructs, both space and time."²¹ These ideas are in stark contrast to territorial concepts of space and solid land. These provocations are developed around Paul Virilio's writings on the materiality of water and the "hydrosphere,"²² and contrasted with other thinkers who critique terrestrial or state ontologies with those of the volume of the sea. Virilio argues further that understanding the Anthropocene world as an 'assemblage' is an effective way of describing the "churnings of the ocean, that both enables and disrupts (or reterritorialises and deterritorialises) earthy striations,"²³ including those of matter and time.

Steinberg and Peters present their argument for "an alternative perspective in which time, as expressed through assembled matter, is nonlinear and fluctuating, and matter is mutable and leaky – part of a process of ongoing reformation."²⁴ These ideas are articulated in my research in the mutable leakiness of cameraless photography's processes and materialities. The chemical, temporal and physical materiality of the ocean, integral to my images, "can never be separated from either the experience of the ocean or the meanings that we attach to oceanic experiences."²⁵ The authors also differentiate between geological land-time as referenced by Massey²⁶ (which is generally speaking, not experienced) and the lived-time encounter with ocean mobility. Their example suggests that one can hike on a mountain trail without realising that one is traversing a landform whose existence is the result of tectonic subduction. It is much more difficult to step into the surf without encountering and reflecting on both water's mobility and its depth.²⁷

18 Jonathon Raban, *A Passage to Juneau: A Sea and its Meanings* (London: Picador, 1999).

19 Steinberg and Peters, 250.

20 Steinberg and Peters, 245.

21 Steinberg and Peters, 252.

22 Paul Virilio, *Bunker Archeology* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 10.

23 Steinberg and Peters, 255.

24 Steinberg and Peters, 256.

25 Steinberg and Peters, 256.

26 Massey, *For Space*.

27 Steinberg and Peters, 258.

The same concepts of lived temporal experience, in, on and around the ocean relate to the key concepts of my methodology in this research. A crossover between these practices and my own can be made in reference to the previously mentioned surfing and kayaking experiential work of Anderson. His description of engagement with the sea on a kayak presents a maritime experience of the sea that is perceptually different to land-based experiences of place and time. My research also makes use of these ideas as a methodological framework for interrogating cameraless photography's potential to document the kind of engagement with the sea that Anderson refers to.

Drawing on this issue, and the concepts of cameraless photography as a witnessing material to record intersubjective experience of place, informs my study's key methodological concerns. This approach employs cameraless photography's aesthetic qualities as uniquely able to interpret and respond to the poetics of seaborne phenomena. Working with tactile-oriented aspects of photochemistry and raw materials of photography, my study acknowledges the various agencies co-forming and co-existent in place and experience of place. Widely intersubjective, post-phenomenological readings require reference to the tactile senses and the 'onflow' of tangible activity in place, between objects, beings and processes, in time and space.

A tactile exchange is particularly true of the sea, as a place of constant flux, volatility, and more than liquid materiality; things which are often 'felt' more than they are seen, especially when on the sea at night. The seaborne or maritime place is conceptually fogged by land-oriented dismissals and quotidian accounts of it as both featureless, and yet mysterious. Other accounts invite us to step outside such everyday interpretations to consider a wider materialist understanding of the sea and the seaborne as place. Consequently, my work implements the cameraless aesthetic and its decentering, ecstatic processes, as instrumental to a post-phenomenological interpretation of place.

As we strive to develop our philosophy of spirit towards a more sustainable and meaningful relationship with our oceanic planet, we have to consider the possibility that humans have taken oceanic things for granted. Looking at life below the water with a sense of wonder and possibility takes a step towards understanding how we might find lasting harmony, as guardians of a natural world dependent upon the conservation of the oceans.

COMMENT

Adapted from the author's exegesis *Along the Waterline: Cameraless Photography and the Nocturnal Register of Seaborne Activity*, PhD Exegesis, Massey University, Wellington, NZ. (2022)

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