



Walead Beshty, *Two Sided Picture (RY)*, January 11, 2007, Valencia, California, Fujicolor Crystal Archive, 2007, installation view, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth, 2016; chromogenic photograph; image courtesy Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth

Material presence

‘Emanations’ at Govett-Brewster

Daniel Palmer, *New Plymouth*

‘Emanations’ took its inspiration from Len Lye’s ‘shadowgraphs’ produced in the 1930s and 1940s. A series of 1947 portraits, barely known during Lye’s astonishingly productive lifetime, in which he persuaded notable subjects such as Georgia O’Keeffe and Le Corbusier to press the sides of their faces to a sheet of photographic paper, formed the centre of the exhibition. From here, Wellington-based curator Geoffrey Batchen, one of the world’s leading photography scholars, travelled backwards to the origins of photography and forwards to its most recent material experiments. His research delivered extraordinary diversity, bringing together more than 200 examples of cameraless imagery across the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery and the new Len Lye Centre (which opened in July 2015 and whose wavy stainless steel exterior has, coincidentally, become a magnetic backdrop to take selfies). A potentially repetitive history of photography in its ‘primal’, often abstract, state was instead turned into a surprising new perspective on the medium. In his writing, Batchen regularly calls for new ways of doing photographic history; here he offered us an instance of such a history that suddenly rendered all previous histories as camera-focused.

‘Emanations’ borrowed its title from Roland Barthes’s famous line in *Camera Lucida* (1980) about the photograph being an emanation of reality rather than a mere copy. Never mind that Barthes showed no interest in photograms. In cameraless photographs, Batchen proposed in the opening wall text, ‘nature represents itself’. Liberated from the ‘shackles’ of perspectival optics, such images are ‘objects in the present’ rather than windows onto the past, offering the promise ‘to get closer to the presence of things, closer to presence in general’.¹ Self-conscious objects, admittedly, but such images are an art of the real despite their often ‘abstract’ appearance.² While these ideas are hardly new to Batchen, he made the effort to fully explore their consequences in ‘Emanations’. The exhibition’s subtitle – ‘The Art of the Cameraless Photograph’ – signalled two things: firstly, this was overwhelmingly an exhibition of artworks rather than the vernacular work Batchen often champions; and secondly, this was more than an exhibition of photograms, which in any case have gone by different names (in the 1830s William Henry Fox Talbot referred to his experiments as ‘photogenic drawing’, while in the 1920s Man Ray and Christian Schad called theirs ‘Rayographs’ and ‘Schadographs’ respectively). More broadly, the term ‘cameraless’ encompasses a variety of potential techniques, which here included the *cliché verre* (produced from engraved drawings on sheets of varnished glass), X-ray, photocopy and even the digital scan. Since there has been no mediation by the camera and no negative, all of these forms are one-of-a-kind image-objects.

Even as most are inevitably behind glass, the resulting exhibition emphasised this sense of material presence far more than conventional modernist photographic displays.

New Plymouth was the unique venue for this exhibition, and it is undeniably remote. For everyone unable to visit, a major book of the same name, published with Prestel, offers something that is both more and less than a catalogue. The exhibition was essentially a global history of cameraless photography told through local collections; it included a wide range of work by New Zealand and Australian artists, together with loans from Europe and New York. By contrast, without restrictions on freight, the book tells a representative global history, chronologically. The book even has two different covers: a limited one with Len Lye and a global one featuring Anna Atkins. Making an effort to minimise the necessary distortions of scale, it is beautifully produced and Batchen’s introductory essay combines detailed historical description with characteristic theoretical flourish.

Two of Lye’s earliest experiments included in the exhibition, *Self-Planting at Night (Night Tree)* and *Watershed* from around 1930, were exhibited in the 1936 International Surrealist Exhibition in London. Better-known surrealists such as Man Ray (who claimed to have accidentally discovered the technique of making photographs without a camera in 1921) are shown in the same room, alongside the work of other avant-garde artists similarly attracted to the possibilities of cameraless photography around the same time, including László Moholy-Nagy, György Kepes and other more marginal figures (such as three of Max Dupain’s Rayographs from 1936, directly inspired by the American he then admired so much). In every case, the selection of images in ‘Emanations’ was fresh, in line with the modernist imperative to make the world new, and often strange. A series of carefully collated vitrines containing publications and ephemera served to witness the circulation of photograms, to draw attention to significant work not physically present in the show (such as the nude blueprints of Robert Rauschenberg and his then wife Susan Weil which featured in *Life* magazine in 1951), and also to remind us that around the time of the Second World War it was fashionable to promote technique of photograms in amateur photography and popular magazines.

If Lye was the exhibition’s nervous centre, its historical heart was an upstairs room of mid-nineteenth-century material. This included a salt print from the 1840s of a Talbot calotype negative made to propagate a contact print of a piece of lace, his ink-engraved leaves from the 1850s (both complicating the story of the ‘unique’ image) as well as a series of cyanotypes of botani-

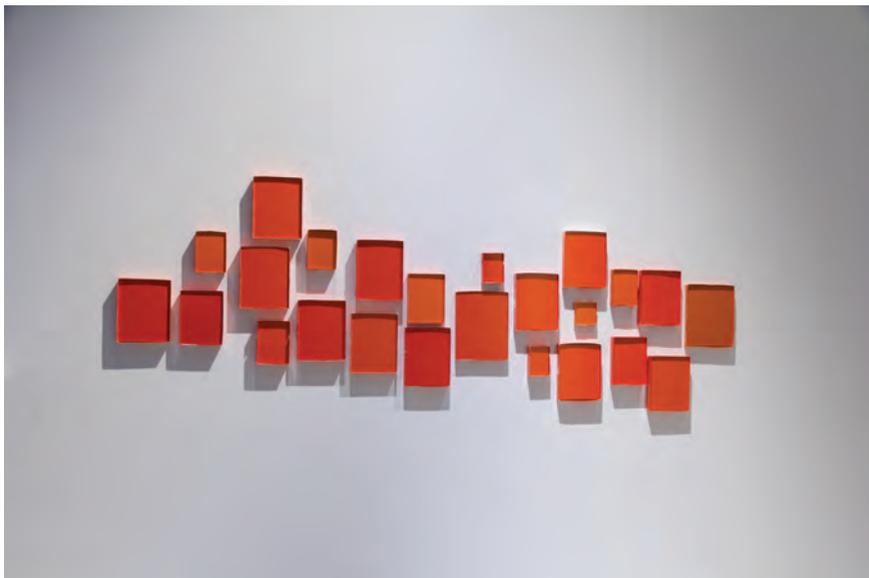


Len Lye cameraless photographic portraits, 1947, installation view, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth, 2016; image courtesy Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth

Emanations: The Art of the Cameraless Photograph, exhibition view, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth, 2016; with work from (front, left to right): Herbert Dobbie's illustrated books cyanotype photographs of New Zealand ferns (1880–92) and unknown photographer's New Zealand fern photograms, 1910; and (back): Anna Atkins's cyanotype photographs, c. 1854; image courtesy Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth

Emanations: The Art of the Cameraless Photograph, exhibition view, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth, 2016, with work from (left to right): Aldo Tambellini, Joyce Campbell, Shaun Waugh and Anne Ferran; image courtesy Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth

Shaun Waugh, *AE₂₀₀₀ 1.1*, 2014, installation view, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth, 2016; 24 Agfa boxes with mounted solid colour inkjet photographs; image courtesy Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth



cal specimens by Atkins. A vitrine included an 1839 publication with an article 'Fac-simile of a Photogenic Drawing' – with a very early engraving from a photograph of a fern leaf. This reproductive desire was animated by these works' proximity to Ian Burn's *Xerox book # 1* (1968), in which the artist photocopied an originally blank sheet of paper over and over, 100 times, until it was filled with the visual noise left by dust and other imperfections (nature representing itself, indeed).

Plants featured prominently throughout, most particularly in New Zealand's love of ferns. Insects, too, proliferated (from Jacques-André Boiffard's abject flies in 1930 to Joan Fontcuberta's crushed insect 'constellation' on his car windscreen in 1993, extending to Anne Noble's colourful 2015 'memorials' to the collapse of the global honeybee population). Contemporary work is as likely to 'document' post-nature, as in Joyce Campbell's microbial survey of Los Angeles, *LA Bloom* (2002), based on swabs from the surfaces of plants and soil allowed to grow as a living culture. Like Japanese artist Shimpei Takeda's *Trace #17-1 Joen-ji* (2012), captured over a month using soil sourced from 12 locations around the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant after the 2011 tsunami, extended duration featured in many works. Such work reminds us that cameraless photographs can show us things that we cannot otherwise see, or at least reveal that conventional visual evidence is no cure for blindness.

Perhaps because of their typically imposing scale, and in keeping with Govett-Brewster's mission, much of the wall space was given to contemporary artists' experiments – including those of Adam Fuss, the 'materialist' colour folds of Walead Beshty, an oversized swirling digital abstraction by Thomas Ruff and, best of all, Christian Marclay's cyanotypes of chaotic strands of cassette tape. Australian artists were well represented, with figures such as Danica Chappell, Simone Douglas, Anne Ferran, Susan Purdy and Justine Varga suggesting that women, in particular, have been drawn to the technique. Harry Nankin was strangely absent.

Contemporary artists' experiments with photograms can easily become formalist exercises, nostalgic, even fetishistic of the analogue process. Remarkably, this exhibition managed to stay clear of this danger, largely because its selections emphasised a

latent or explicit politics, often integrally connected to the technical processes deployed. In the case of Alison Rossiter, who relies on chance to produce images from her huge collection of obsolete photographic paper, or Robert Owen's collection of film stubs as readymade Rothko-like abstractions, or Shaun Waugh's Agfa photographic paper boxes turned into solid orange monochromes, this was implicitly linked to the onset of digital photography. Batchen rejects the idea that the current interest in photograms among contemporary artists is merely a response to digital photography, proposing that 'restless experiments' about 'photography itself' have always been part of photography's history. Nevertheless, he admits that 'to make such photographs returns photography to a unique, hand-made craft and away from an automatic subservience to global capitalism and its vast economies of mass production and exploitation'. To be sure, the touch of the artist was an important thread within the exhibition. The labour of producing cameraless photographs ensured that hands and other body parts often featured in one form or another (explicitly, in Lucinda Kennedy's body-sized traces of a couple's sexual intercourse, fluids and all). As Batchen suggests, it is as if, in the absence of the camera, the body mediates in the registration of light onto a photographic surface.

1. As Batchen argues in the accompanying book (Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth, and DelMonico Books/Prestel, London, Munich and New York, 2016, p. 5): '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.'

2. Over and over in the exhibition it was not always clear what the images depicted, given their departure from conventional photographic realism. This was particularly apparent in the conceptually driven contemporary work, where background knowledge was required to understand the significance of the images. This crucial linguistic supplement took the form of intelligent and concise wall labels discretely displayed on little horizontal shelves next to the work.

'Emanations: The Art of the Cameraless Photograph' was exhibited at the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth, from 29 April until 14 August 2016.

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