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A NEW APPROACH TO LANDSCAPE PHOTOGRAPHY IN THE AGE OF THE ANTHROPOCENE

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This article presents the initial results of my artistic research project The Sustainist Gaze in which I examine the possibilities between organic photography, science, and participatory design to find a methodology for visualizing the Anthropocene, protesting against it, and enabling solidarity with nonhumans. It is a call for action against the framework within which humankind strongly influences the earth's climate, atmosphere, geology, and biodiversity. Considering photography from this perspective made me doubt the self-evidence of my predominantly digital work process, and prompted me to return to the anotype, an organic process at the root of the discovery of photography. This old technique is in fact a suitable tool for approaching contemporary ecological topics because it adds layers of meaning that digital images cannot contain, such as the incorporation of time, entropy, and tactility, as well as a strong connection with ecology, the importance of sensory perception, and the ability to embed what was photographed in the print itself. These aspects are elaborated on and illustrated by my artistic project MANUFACTUUR 3.0.

1 Giacomo D'Alisa, Federico Demaria, and Giorgos Kallis, *Degrowth: A Vocabulary for a New Era* (London: Routledge, 2014), 20–44.

2 Christophe Bonneuil and Jean-Baptiste Fressoz, *The Shock of the Anthropocene: The Earth, History and Us*, trans. David Fernbach (London: Verso, 2017), 5–18; T.J. Demos, *Against the Anthropocene, Visual Culture and Environment Today* (Berlin: Sternberg, 2017), 10–22.

Our society is currently confronted with the challenges of disruptive technological, economic, environmental, and social change. Global warming is accelerating, raw materials are becoming scarce, pollution is on the rise and social inequality is increasing: these are only a few of the problems that we are confronted with almost daily.¹ We currently find ourselves in the Anthropocene era in which humankind influences the earth's climate, atmosphere, geology, and biodiversity.² My artistic work reacts against this state of the Earth through

organic photography and participatory design methodologies. In this short article I elaborate upon my choice of the anthotype process as my preferred weapon to visualize the Anthropocene (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1
Kristof Vrancken
Strain, 2016
46 x 61cm, Anthotype: elderberry
and gin emulsion on paper
Photographer's archive

The anthotype is an organic and traditionally analogue process that was first described by the prominent scientist, mathematician, botanist, and experimental photographer Sir John Herschel (1792–1871) in his paper “On the Action of the Rays of the Solar Spectrum on Vegetable Colours, and on Some New Photographic Processes”, which was published in the scholarly journal *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London* in 1842.³ The anthotype process is an organic photographic process that affects the discoloration of natural pigments exposed to ultraviolet light (James, 2016).⁴ An anthotype is created by applying a photosensitive emulsion made from the colour pigments of plants to a carrier and exposing it to sunlight for several days or weeks. Ultraviolet rays break down the colours, slowly creating an image (Fig. 2).

3 John Herschel, “On the Action of the Rays of the Solar Spectrum on Vegetable Colours, and on Some New Photographic Processes,” *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London* 132 (1842), 181–214.

4 Christopher James, *The Book of Alternative Photographic Processes* (Boston: Cengage Learning, 2016), 44–50, 670.

Fig. 2

Jenny Stieglitz

Wall Drawing of the Anthotype

Process, 2016

200 x 200cm, Organic inks on plaster

Z33, Hasselt, Belgium



The anthotype print has a very special property. By actually using plants originating from the depicted landscape to create photos from that landscape, a self-referential relationship is established between the physical landscape and its photographic representation. The landscape actually works as an agent for the photographic image on different levels. The anthotype print not only *represents* the landscape, it is the landscape, since it is made from the flora that grows there (Fig. 3). Because plants are increasingly affected by environ-

Fig. 3

Kristof Vrancken

Harvesting Ingredients

in a Contaminated Area, 2016

Digital Image. Photographer's archive





Fig. 4
 Kristof Vrancken
Cameraless Photograph: Elderberry Plant, 2016
 46 x 61cm, Anthotype: elderberry and gin emulsion on paper
 Photographer's archive



Fig. 5
 Kristof Vrancken
Experiments on Elderberry Anthotype Emulsions, 2016
 46 x 61cm, Anthotype: elderberry and gin emulsion on paper
 Photographer's archive

mental stressors, especially by the devastating consequences of global climate change, the anthotype, in which plants are used in the preparation of a photographic emulsion, acts as a suitable tool to tell the narrative of, and illustrate, the Anthropocene (Fig. 4).⁵

5 Parvaiz Ahmad and M.N.V. Prasad, eds, *Environmental Adaptations and Stress Tolerance of Plants in the Era of Climate Change* (New York: Springer, 2002).

The anothype process thus enables us to not only experience the story of the landscape from a human point of view, but also allows us to open up and listen to the stories that plants and other organisms can tell us about the landscape. Using this organic photographic method allows for a more embedded attitude towards ecology than any other chemical or digital process. The use of the anothype process was never an aesthetic choice for me, but rather a means to visualize invisible stories that are present underground.

The first project in which I applied the anothype technique to create new artistic work was *MANUFACTUUR 3.0*. This exhibition was curated by Evelien Bracke and was held in the Z33 – House for Contemporary Art located in Hasselt, Belgium.⁶ The departure point of the exhibition was the need to rethink our traditional methods of production and to provide some alternatives. The exhibition itself was a new type of manufacture, a production place where designers, artists, and architects created new work based on alternative production scenarios over the course of three months (from October to December 2016).⁷ The focus shifted from presenting products as end results to showing production processes (Fig. 10).

The photographic series that originated from this project is entitled *Strain* (2016) (Figs 1, 7–9). It consists of five anothype prints made with an emul-

6 See <https://z33research.be/2016/11/manufactuur-3-0/>, accessed 3 December 2018.

7 See <http://z33research.be/2016/11/manufactuur-3-0/>, accessed 21 April 2017.

Fig. 6
Kristof Vrancken
Experiments with potable Elderberry
Anothype Emulsions
Digital Image
Photographer's archive



sion of elderberry and gin. The title refers to draining or sifting a substance, an essential part of producing a photographic emulsion. At the same time, it symbolizes a force that pulls or stretches something to an extreme or damaging degree. The series focuses on the complex relationship between humankind and nature, in which both are under pressure. The images showcase the damage caused by a severe storm that struck Wellen, Belgium on 23 June 2016. The rain, hail, and wind damage ran into the millions of euros. The municipality, located about 15 km from Hasselt, lies in Haspengouw, which is one of the largest fruit-growing regions in Western Europe. The heavy storm was disastrous



Fig. 7, 8
Kristof Vrancken
Strain, 2016
46x 61cm, Anthotype: elderberry
and gin emulsion on paper
Photographer's archive



Fig. 9
Kristof Vrancken
Strain, 2016
46x 61cm, Anthotype: elderberry
and gin emulsion on paper
Photographer's archive

8 Jozef C. Croughs, "Duizenden tonnen fruit verloren," *De Standaard*, 27 June 2016, 28.

9 Kees Dorland, Richard S. J. Tol, and Jean P. Palutikof, "Vulnerability of the Netherlands and Northwest Europe to Storm Damage under *Climate Change*," *Climatic Change* 43.3 (1999), 513–35.

10 Marcel De Cleene and Marie Claire Lejeune, *Compendium van rituele planten in Europa* (Ghent: Mens en Cultuur, 2008), 125, 219–27, 276, 386–97, 553, 564, 728; Andrzej Sidor and Anna Gramza-Michałowska, "Advanced Research on the Antioxidant and Health Benefit of Elderberry (*Sambucus Nigra*) in Food – a Review," *Journal of Functional Foods* 18.2 (2015), 941–58.

11 Marcel De Cleene and Marie Claire Lejeune, "Rituele planten in ons dagelijks leven," in *Compendium van rituele planten in Europa* (Ghent: Mens en Cultuur, 2008), 15–22.

for the farmers, who lost an entire harvest and their trees.⁸ *Strain* shows the storm damage using bruised berries from the afflicted landscape. It witnesses the tension between humankind and natural forces in a direct and physical manner. Agriculture has turned the Haspengouw landscape, which is neatly divided into pastures, arable land, and fruit orchards, into a functional production site with a view to generating as much profit as possible. Nature — in the form of a storm — reclaimed the landscape, resulting in chaos and destruction. These tensions will continually increase in the future due to man-made climatological changes. Studies have shown that severe storms will increase in frequency due to global warming, and food production will be under even more pressure.⁹

Since *MANUFACTUUR* 3.0 focuses on projects that are locally embedded, and since Hasselt is historically known for its gin distilleries, it seemed obvious to connect my project to this tradition. As alcohol is often added to photographic emulsions, I thought of developing a mixture of Hasselt gin and created new photographic emulsions based on the historic method of preparation as described by Herschel. This resulted in a photographic emulsion that was both light-sensitive and drinkable. The plants I used were local juniper berries, nettle, blackberries, sloe, tansy, and elderberries. They not only have a place within the traditional gin-making process, but also have medicinal, ritual, and other useful properties.¹⁰ It is a pity that such applications, and those of other edible plants near the city, have been forgotten due to our modern lifestyle in which nature and culture are drifting away from each other. With this project, I wanted to draw attention to these underutilized, free, and widely available sources of food and raw materials that also form an essential part of our local identity and history.¹¹

I started experimenting with these local ingredients, aiming to develop an organic photographic emulsion with a balance between light-sensitivity, good image quality, and taste (Fig. 5). In my quest for the right formula I studied eigh-

teenth- and nineteenth-century traditions and recipes for homemade liqueurs based on gin, berries, and honey. For this occasion, I collaborated with the Hasselt Jenever (Gin) Museum and local distiller 't Stookkot which specializes in the use of local raw, organic ingredients which affect the taste of gin.¹²

This project built bridges between diverse domains that are not usually associated with one another. It combined photography and taste, as well as local history, biology, and alchemy. Although taste is still an unexplored parameter

¹² See <http://www.jenevermuseum.be/en>; <http://www.stookkot.be/>, both accessed 21 April 2017. "The flavour of spirit drinks is mainly influenced by the quality and flavour of the raw materials, their varieties, and their geographical origin. Flavour quality is also influenced by the various special, mostly traditional technologie



Fig. 10 Kristof Vrancken *My MANUFACTUUR-studio in Z33, Hasselt, Belgium*
Scenography by Olivier Goethals

of fermentation, distillation, and maturation". Norbert Christoph and Claudia Bauer-Christoph, "Flavour of Spirit Drinks: Raw Materials, Fermentation, Distillation, and Ageing," in *Flavours and Fragrances Chemistry, Bioprocessing and Sustainability*, ed. Ralf Günter Berger (Berlin: Springer, 2007), 237.

13 I would like to thank Prof. Dr Jean Manca, Prof. Dr Roland Valcke, Jan Boelen, Evelien Bracke, Dr Dirk Reynnders, Dr Veerle Van der Sluys, Dr Leen Engelen and Dr Leen Kelchtermans for their valuable remarks, and Edith Doove for the translation.

in photography, it proved to be a fascinating way to interact with an audience. Offering a drink as a means to strike up a conversation is a common social convention. A drinkable, light-sensitive emulsion made from edible berries collected in the photographed landscape appealed to the audience's imagination (Fig. 6). This opened a dialogue and the first step towards consciousness was established. In this series, one experiences the anothotype image using one's senses of vision, smell, touch, and taste. Drinking the emulsion creates a special connection between the observer, the landscape, and the image. This results in a powerful immanent relationship with the image.

By using the nineteenth-century anothotype technique in artistic photography I want to protest against the Anthropocene and contribute to a greater consciousness of our planet's problematic state. The anothotype image has the ability to embed what was photographed in the print itself and it can translate in a poetic way the narratives of the strained landscape.¹³

Kristof Vrancken is based at the LUCA School of Arts in Genk, where he is active as a researcher and teacher in Experimental Photography and Hybrid Media. He is currently preparing an artistic PhD dissertation on strategies to protest against the Anthropocene through Photography and Participatory Design Processes. In his most recent work Vrancken not only uses the landscape as a passive subject but also as an active ingredient of his work. By developing his tactile pictures with local plant extracts he strengthens the relationship between the physical place and the image.