MEDIATING: FROM METAPHOR TO METHOD

Leanne Bell Gonczarow

The idea that photo-technology mediates our understanding of nature is cemented in image discourse. As media theorist Jussi Parikka said in his 2015 book *Geology of Media*, 'it is through and in media that we grasp earth as an object for cognitive, practical, and affective relations' (Parikka 2015, 12).

Photo-technology's ability to represent the global ice-melt inevitably focuses on 'the seen', or less inevitably, on what can no longer be seen. Glaciers recede, revealing stratas of time past. Documentary images show the landscape in crisis, as the ice-sheets are shown fractured, floating, adrift—out of place and out of time—polar bears clinging to precarious fragments. These images draw on landscape conventions, tending to use scale and viewpoint to conjure a sense of sublimity. To one not living in proximity to these landscapes, the images may appear grand, but remote, beautiful but alienating. The sense of the remoteness of these images is perhaps amplified by viewing them in the stream of images encountered on the screens that furnish our lives.

Parikka revisited his position on the mediating quality of images in the introduction to the 2021 collection of essays *Photography Off the Scale, Technologies and Theories of the Mass Image* (with co-writer Tomáš Dvořák), pointing out that 'a sense of the catastrophic has crept into how we speak, think and write of photographs in digital culture. The current state of photographic production is often characterised in the apocalyptic terms of a deluge or avalanche, an explosion or eruption, a tsunami or storm' (Dvořák & Parikka 2021, 4). They suggest this indicates 'a moment in which photographs cease to act as mediators between us and the world, instead making it opaque and obscure' (Dvořák & Parikka 2021, 4).

Indeed, this opacity has only increased in the last few years, as machine-generated images have flooded the stream, further muddying the representational waters. So,

what then can the singular image 'do' to activate our understanding, our empathy, our anger around the climate crisis —where is the agency? What methods can be used, first to navigate, and then to create images which seek to affect our cognitive grasp of the earth and our relationship with it?

Parikka highlights strategies for navigating individual images from within the 'unmanageable and unstoppable cascade', through a discussion of Roland Barthes'[2] and Vilém Flusser's[3] 'singular approaches to defining a measure, standard or parameter of what a (good) photograph is', in order to talk about 'the way we look at photographs' in Barthes case, and in Flusser's 'the way we make them' (Dvořák & Parikka 2021, 7-10). While Barthes provides 'a detailed discussion of several images' and has a clear 'preference for human subjects' (they almost all picture faces or human figures), Flusser 'does not discuss individual images, but rather suggests to draw a line between categories of informative and redundant photographs' (Dvořák & Parikka 2021, 9-10).

My own strategy is not to define an individual photograph as good or bad, informative or redundant. It is also the case that recent photography criticism has focused less on the individual image or canon than on theories of the mass image—Parikka references Lev Manovich's 'Cultural Analytics'[4] on this. However, as referenced above, watery metaphors have become embedded in discourses of the digital in recent years[5] and if to further adopt them here, I might consider my own navigation through the deluge of images as akin to encountering pieces of ice detached from a glacier; specific time-bound fragments of the mass image.

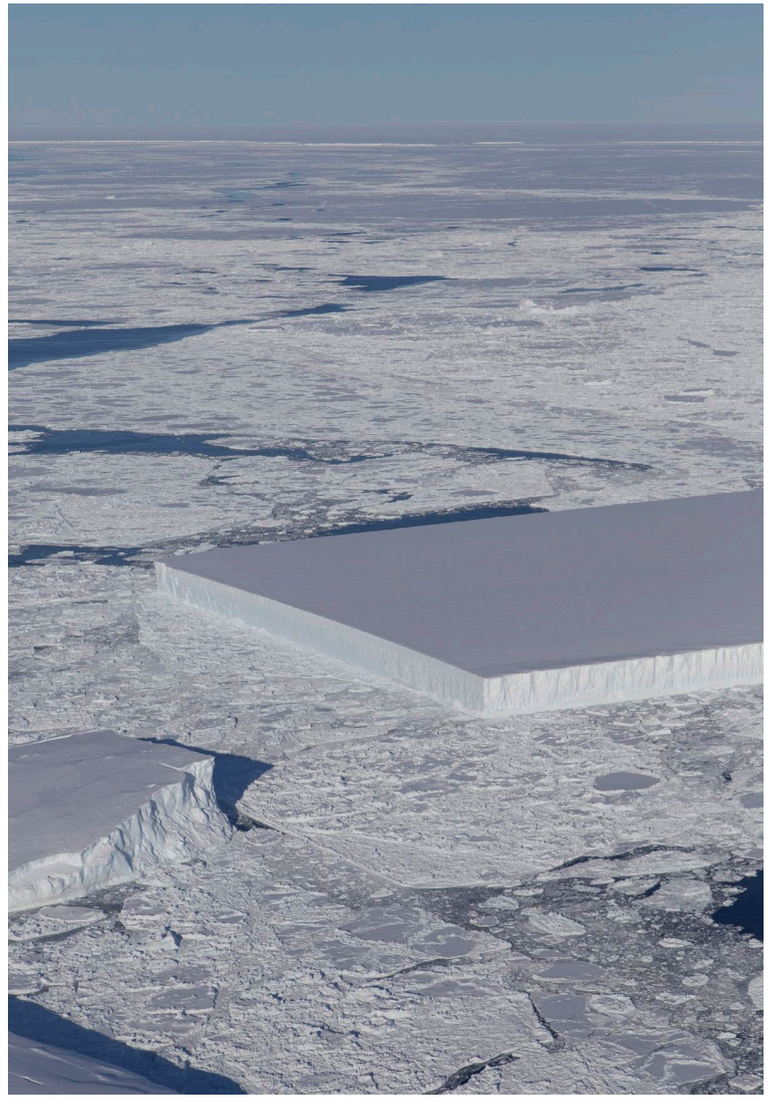


Fig.1 Image of a tabular iceberg taken by Jeremy Harbeck, senior support scientist on Operation IceBridge (NASA's longest-running aerial survey of polar ice), on a flight over the northern Antarctic Peninsula on Oct. 16, 2018. Accessed 14 Sep 2023 https://www3.nasa.gov/sites/default/files/thumbnails/image/tab_iceberg_harbeck-sm.jpg

2 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida.* (Vintage, 2020)

3 Vilém Flusser. *Towards a philosophy of photography.* (Reaktion Books, 2020)

4 Lev Manovich, *Cultural Analytics* (The MIT Press, 2020).

5 A significant account of this can be found at: Cadence Kinsey, 'Fluid Dynamics: On the Representation of Water and Discourses of the Digital', Art History 43, no. 3 (1 June 2020): 510–37, https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8365.12483.

In October 2018, this metaphor manifested itself as a literal encounter as I came across an image of a tabular iceberg shared by NASA's social media (Fig. 1). This image was widely shared across popular science and culture websites due, in part, no doubt to its disarming appearance. The image shows a piece of ice that detached from the Larsen C ice shelf in the Antarctic peninsula, a piece of ice around a mile or two long and 130 feet tall.

This chance encounter with a singular image has significantly shaped my methodological thinking and approach to the practice-research for the duration of my doctoral project. I have been consumed by its implications and possibilities, returning to it again and again… and these implications and possibilities were activated first and foremost by the striking form of the iceberg—the rectangle. The rectangular form abstracts our idea of what an iceberg can be. Ask someone to draw an iceberg and they would most likely draw what we might consider, in Platonic terms, to be a depiction of the idea of 'icebergness'—a triangulated form jutting jaggedly from a horizontal plane. The tabular iceberg is a plane, framed by distinct perpendicular edges.

> **I hold the image in my mind, walk its four edges. I float above it, feel myself weightless—an ode to an astronaut. Tied to its four corners, I am grounded. The rectangle holds me in space, excludes the unruly earth. Freezes. Freezing.**

Deleuze and Guattari defined art as an activity taking place on the 'plane of composition.' They saw this as distinct from the 'plane of immanence' on which the concepts of philosophy were set out (Deleuze and Guattari 1996). The plane provided by the tabular iceberg's aesthetic slicing of time and space has a peculiar transcendental 'affect'[6] which we might consider to be akin to the territory of art. As Deleuze and Guattari said, 'Art takes a bit of chaos in a frame in order to form a composed chaos that becomes sensory' (Deleuze and Guattari 1996).

6 Deleuze and Guattari (after Spinoza and Bergsson) use the term 'affect' to place emphasis on bodily or embodied experience.

In her essay *Chaos Territory Art*, Australian philosopher and feminist theorist Elizabeth Grosz expands on the theories of Deleuze and Guattari to extol the power of the 'frame' to establish 'territory out of the chaos that is the earth' (Grosz 2008, 11):

> Framing and deframing become art's modes of territorialization and deterritorialization through sensation; framing becomes the means by which the plane of composition composes, deframing its modes of upheaval and transformation (Grosz 2008, 13).

EMBODYING THE IMAGE

In the tabular iceberg, there is an uncanniness to the framing of the earth, made not by an external body operating a viewfinder with the hope to create art, but by the earth itself.[7] In its carving of the ice, the earth has created a rectangular zone of reflection.

It is widely accepted that decreasing photonic reflection off white-ice is one of the major accelerators of global-warming. On this process Nasa has stated:

> All day, every day the Sun hurls a steady stream of photons toward the Earth in the form of high energy, shortwave radiation. Some photons are reflected by atmospheric particles, clouds, snow and ice, even ocean whitecaps. Other photons are absorbed by the Earth's land and ocean surfaces, which heat up. These heated surfaces emit photons back to the atmosphere in the form of lower energy, long-wavelength radiation. Some of these photons eventually make it all the way back out to space. The balance of incoming and outgoing photons over the whole planet, the net radiative flux, determines Earth's temperature "set point" (Lindsey 2007).

7 This of course is not to say the human hand is not implicated here, as the breaking away of the ice may be directly attributed to the effects of anthropogenic climate change.

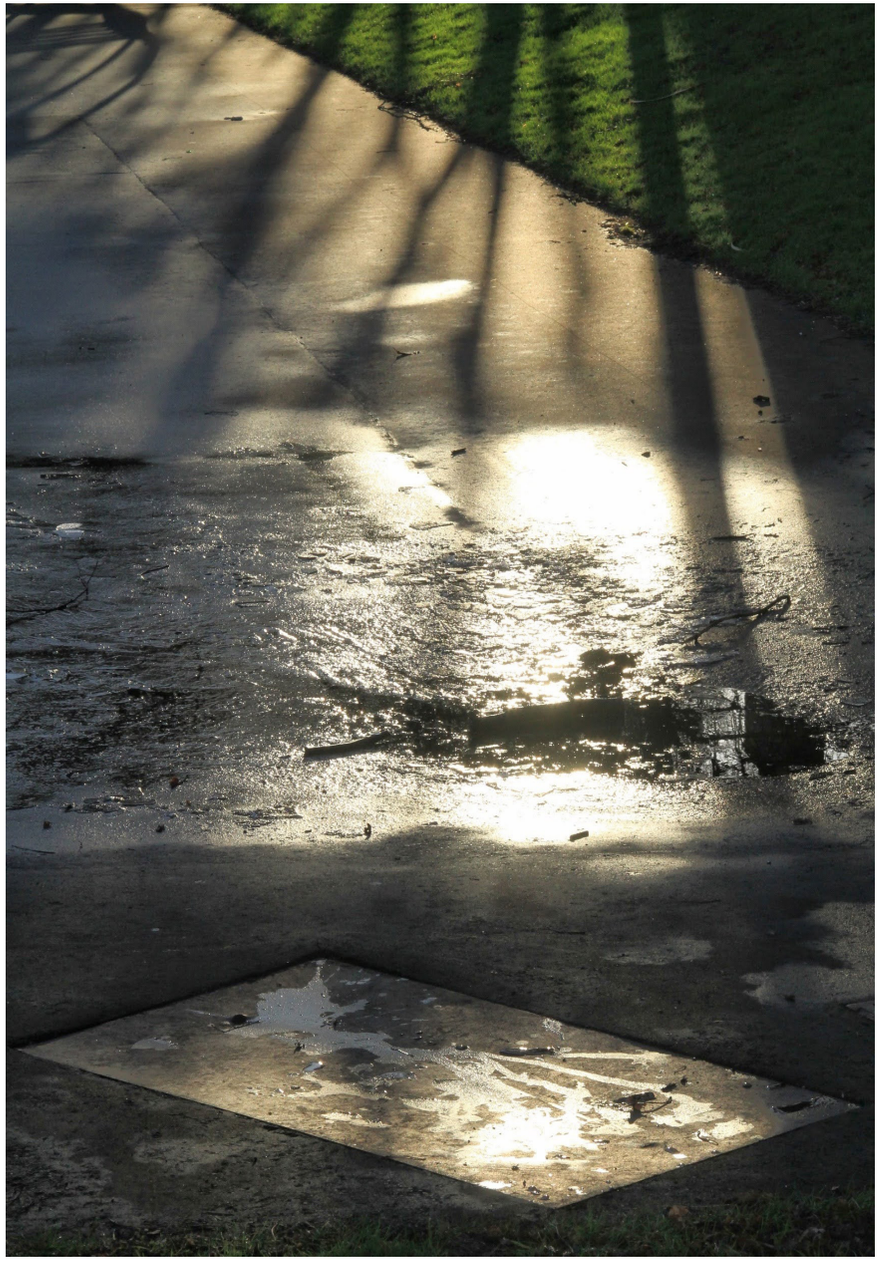




Fig. 2. Leanne Bell Gonczarow, Inside every photograph is another photograph. January 2021

Looking through the interface[8] provided by the NASA image, I began to see not a photograph of a tabular iceberg, but the tabular iceberg itself as a photograph—a photograph performed by the earth. More precisely, I imagine the tabular iceberg as sensor and screen—a sensor receiving photons from the sun (as a camera sensor might) and a screen broadcasting an 'image' of itself extra-terrestrially as its surface bounces those photons back to space. The tabular iceberg becomes a broadcast image of climate-change on earth, only possible to view from a spacecraft or alien telescope.

The reciprocal nature of thinking and making means it is not always possible to narrate a linear chronology of thought to action, but in this case there was a direct timeline correlation to (what I consider to be) my techno-material-imaginative reading of the mediated image of the iceberg, my way of seeing and photographing the day-to-day (see example Fig. 2 above), and my subsequent practical activity in the studio as I began to make 'screens' from ice.

My initial experiments focused on the aesthetic possibilities of the surface to receive a projected image (Fig. 3). I then worked with positioning the screens in an outdoor landscape, focusing my attention on them not only as surface for projection but as objects in themselves, photographing them outdoors using only the light of the sun.

Rather than revealing an image (as screens are wont to do), the screens in their full form in these photographs obscure the landscape they are situated in. In *Have you tried turning it on and off again?* (Fig. 4 below), a diptych

8 In the use of the term interface I refer to Colleen Boyle's essay 'Eyes of the Machine: The Role of Imaginative Processes in the Construction of Unseen Realities via Photographic Images' in which Boyle aims to 'explore the possibility that the photograph forms a perceptual bridge – an interface – between what we know and what we can imagine, playing a pivotal role in constructing our perception of unseen realities.' (Boyle 2013) In positioning the photograph as an interface for our imagination, Boyle removes some of the burden of representation. She acknowledges that the 'mechanical "vision" of the photograph acts as a starting point: a pictorial space that invites the construction of a more holistic reality and one that may begin with "objective" knowledge but which is completed by the "subjective" imagination.' (Boyle 2013)

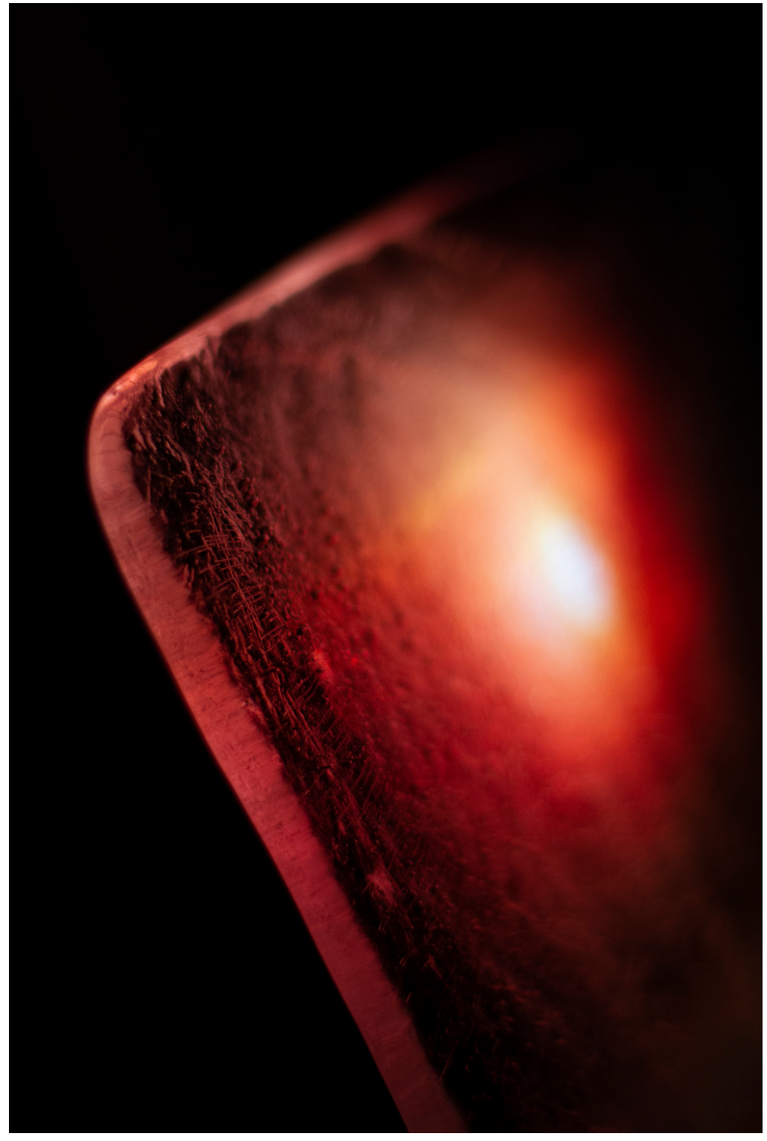


Fig. 3. A projected image of a sunset onto a screen made from ice. Leanne Bell Gonczarow, January 2021

of images of the same screen taken minutes apart shows the screen metamorphosed by sunlight striking its surface. The image the screen presents is of itself, 'switched on', activated and transformed by its interaction with the environment.



Fig. 4. Leanne Bell Gonczarow,
Have you tried turning it on and off again?, 2021



Fig. 5. Leanne Bell Gonczarow, *It's not in the cloud*, 2021

In *It's not in the cloud* (Fig. 5. above) deep snow supports the screen as it descends into formlessness in the landscape. Esther Leslie, Professor of Political Aesthetics at Birkbeck, University of London, has said of ice, that it is 'a transient form, which is perhaps to say, not a form at all, for it always presses towards formlessness again' (Leslie 2016, 81). This photograph, however, captures a moment of apparent solidity, the screen presenting as a strangely monolithic mass. Susan Sontag once famously described photographs as testifying 'to time's relentless melt', that in their 'slicing out' and 'freezing' of a moment we 'participate in another person's (or thing's) mortality, vulnerability, mutability' (Sontag 2014, 15). The screen in *It's not in the cloud* is surely mutable, vulnerable and melting in time and the photograph of the screen provides a literal and metaphorical frozen moment for contemplation.

Light, time and agency could be described as ontological touchstones of photography. A human may attempt to create agency in relation to time and light by the act of taking a photograph. A photograph is/was composed of light in relation to time. A photograph is/was the result of the reflection of light. Ice reflects light. To photograph is to 'testify to time's relentless melt', said Sontag. A photograph freezes, ice melts. A lack of reflection of light from the shrinking surface of ice accelerates global warming. A lack of reflection depletes agency.

RECTANGULAR THINKING

It could be argued that in the age of rapidly developing immersive image technologies including 360-degree imaging (panatography) and virtual reality, the importance of the frame to the ontology of photography has started to dissolve—but it is still the case the rectangle remains the dominant mode of reception for photographic images. As artist John Maclean highlighted when reflecting upon his own endeavour to rethink the rectangular in photography[9] 'the rectangle will close around the image again—in the form of a frame, a page or a screen'. (Maclean 2018). Maclean then asserts, '—but the photographer need not be trapped by the inertia of rectangular thinking. Today a photograph is only ever paused mid-flow, mid-reformation: it is free to evolve as the artist evolves' (Maclean 2018).

Writing on Maclean for 1000 words magazine, Duncan Wooldridge referred to John Tagg's concept of the disciplinary frame[10] stating that 'we rarely transgress the boundary, the hard edge of the image' and questioned, 'Why are we so passive within the photographic process, so quick to concede to the image, and its predetermined geometries?' (Woolridge 2018). He continues:

9 Reflecting upon his series Outthinking the Rectangle which can be found at https://www.jmaclean.co.uk/art/outthinking/

10 John Tagg, The Disciplinary Frame: Photographic Truths and the Capture of Meaning, NED-New edition (University of Minnesota Press, 2009), https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/j.ctttv1qh.

> We concede not only to the photograph's restraint as a sharply defined image—even though it is more accurately an accumulation of cones of light—but we submit also to the claim that the photograph's meaning exists in what it shows, over how it does so. We have placed representation ahead of the gesture, ahead of the act. (Woolridge 2018)

Through my practice-research I consider photography not primarily as a representational practice but as a performative process of becoming, the outcomes of which are shaped by its particular technicities and material entanglements with the world.

As pointed out by Guiliana Bruno (Professor of Visual and Environmental Studies at Harvard University), 'Materiality is not a question of materials but, fundamentally, of activating material relations' (Bruno 2014, 8).

RECTANGLE AS METHOD

For me the rectangle then provides both a conceptual/metaphorical and literal/material framework through which relations can be formed. The rectangle is not something to escape in the practice, but rather the foundation of a method: its a fundamental formal and conceptual quality to be interrogated, and a generative constraint in which performative engagements with matter can be contained and their affective relations can begin to emerge.

To activate these relations in the studio, I gather rectangular pieces of light reflecting and absorbing materials (including glass, perspex, black velvet, obsidian, biodegradable confetti and ice itself) to construct and document micro-environments for photographic enquiry. In these studio set-ups I allow non-predetermined photographic responses to emerge through a series of performative actions and gestures.

Marooned in a non-reflective space provided by a velvet black-out cloth, the floating rectangles function as

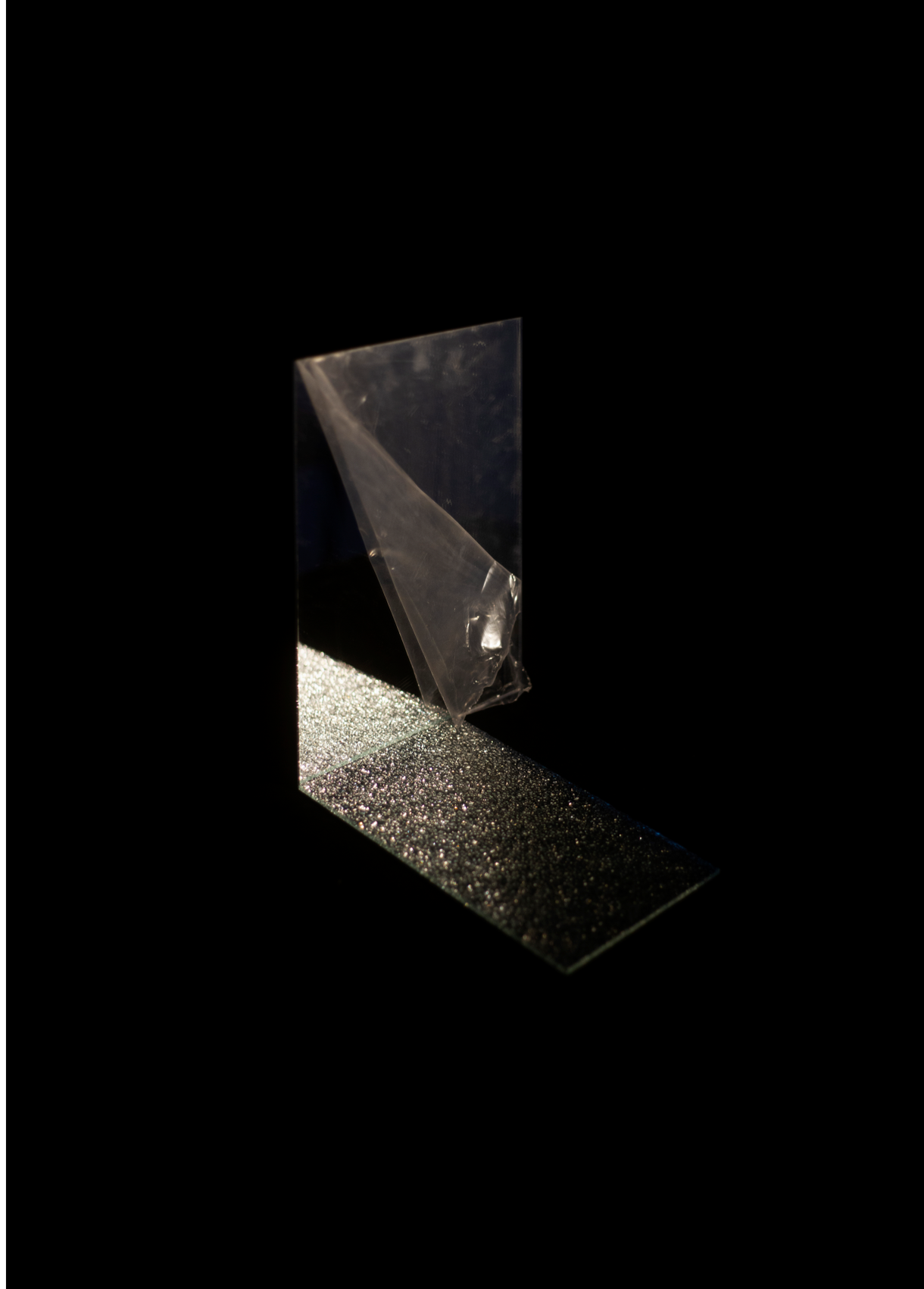


Fig. 6. Leanne Bell Gonczarow, *A Way In*, 2021.
Digital Photography (Glass, Mirrored Perspex, Cellophane)

studio stand-ins for the ice-sheets. A spotlight is a stand-in for the sun, as I work with the camera to think through the reflection and absorption of light as it interacts with matter.

These 'stand-ins' 'also have material lives of their own and their narratives and histories are entangled with the melting ice in a multitude of complex ways. In '*I can't see that far ahead*' (Fig. 7. right) a rectangular piece of polished obsidian sits perpendicular to a sheet of ice approximately the same size. The two surfaces could be described as diametrically opposed in appearance (one dark/black, one light/white) and in their formation – the obsidian having formed from intense heat cooling and the ice unforming as freezing temperatures rise – but these dichotomies only serve to separate the materials: their coming together could perhaps be better articulated through the idea of a Baradian 'intra-action'[12] – that is the understanding that separations or differentiations only exist within relations.

In paying attention to these material relations, I am guided by a desire to 'follow the material' and my approach aligns closely with the statement of purpose created by members of the 'Anthropocene Commons' who 'propose forms of creative experiments and play as a way to follow the life of materials' (Bhangu et al. 2014). My experiments in the studio contain gestures which mirror the proposals set out in their essay 'Feeling/Following: Creative Experiments and Material Play' (Bhangu et al. 2014) in that they aim to, 'follow, act, react, record, and trace the often-messy material convergences of concept, matter, and energy in the universe' (Bhangu et al. 2014).

The personal/micro scale of these material convergences may offer a wayin to understanding the macro/planetary processes at play as the ice-albedo feedback loop continues to contribute to earth's rising temperature. There is a mediation of my own environmental despair through this process that could be considered a form of agency. Does this sense of agency transfer to the singular

12 Physicist and feminist theorist Karen Barad created the term 'intra-action' to replace the term interaction to acknowledge 'the impossibility of an absolute separation or classically understood objectivity, in which an apparatus (a technology or medium used to measure a property) or a person using an apparatus are not considered to be part of the process that allows for specifically located "outcomes" or measurement' (Nikolić 2018).

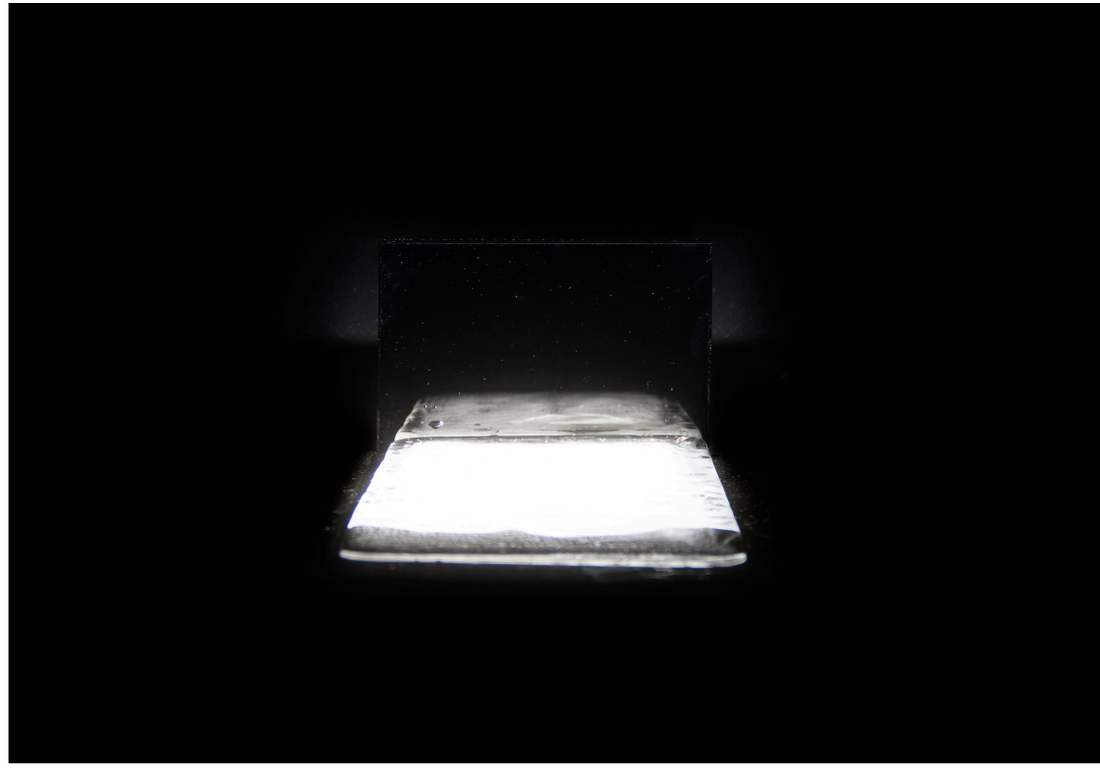
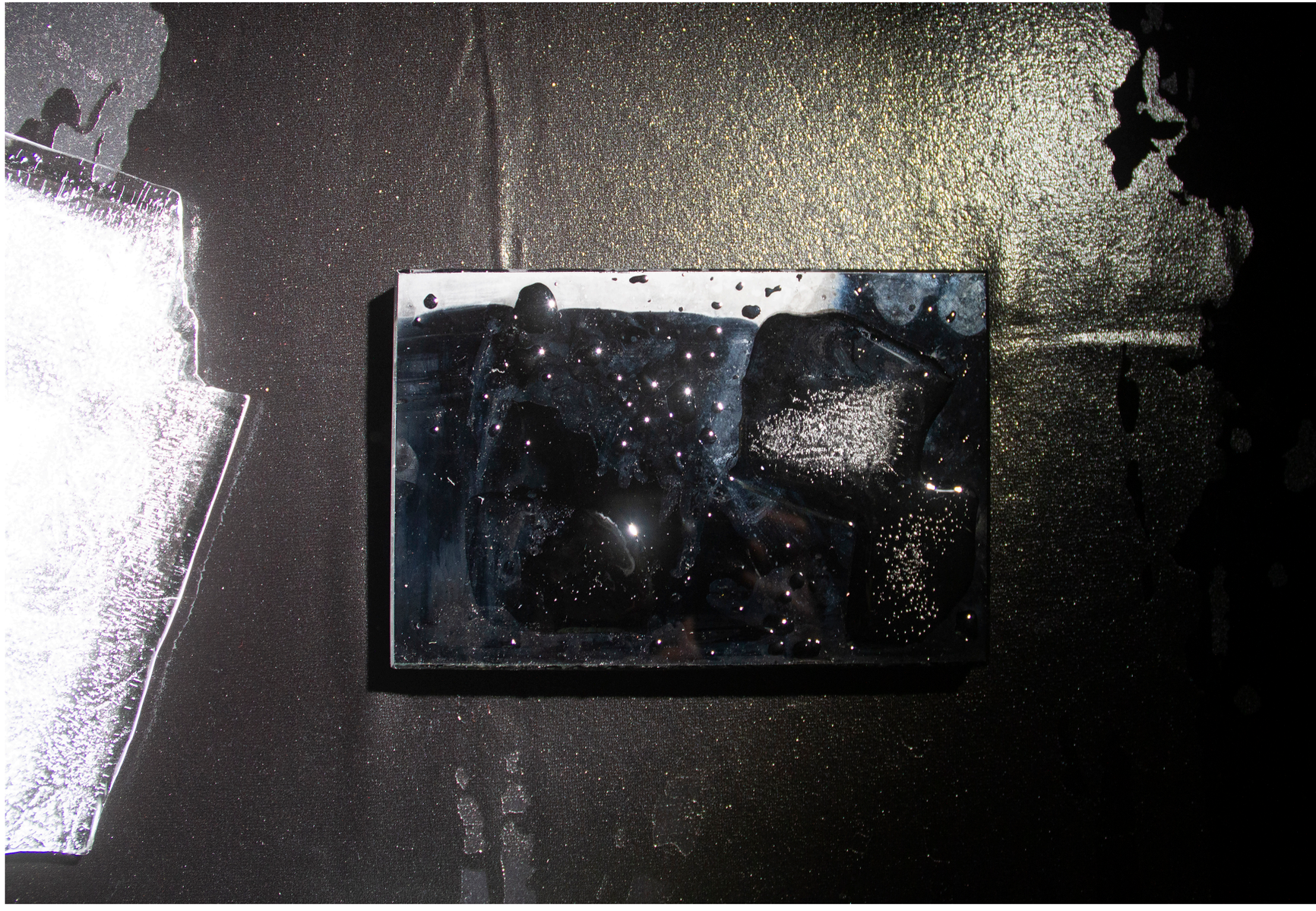


Fig. 7. Leanne Bell Gonczarow, *I can't see that far ahead*, 2022. Digital Photography (Obsidian, Ice)



images that emerge from the experiments? I would hesitate to make that claim. I would however look again to Barad to suggest that 'agency is not an individual property' (Sauzet 2017) but rather a question of intra-acting phenomena—'a decision, an incision, a cutting together/apart of the agentic qualities of phenomena that emerge in the ongoing performance of the world' (Sauzet 2017).[13] In moving beyond the representational in their approach, the resulting images provide an active engagement which, in an agential-realist sense, look to make 'the world simultaneously small and big'

Fig. 8. Leanne Bell Gonczarow, *Towards Entropy*, 2021. Digital Photography (Obsidian, Ice, Black Velvet)

13 Karen Barad's theory of 'Agential Realism', posits that phenomena, objects and materialisms are not inherently separate from each other but profoundly entangled, and that separations or 'cuts' between them are only enacted in order for us to examine and attempt to make sense of them (Barad 2007, p.132-185).

(Sauzet 2017). It is perhaps in this compression/expansion of space and time (anchored by the rectangle in various states of becoming and serving as a reminder of the omnipresent apparatus) that meaning may begin to unfold.



Fig. 9. Leanne Bell Gonczarow, Gesture III - Patchwork, 2023. Digital Photography

REFERENCES

Barad, Karen. 2007. Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning. Durham: Duke University Press.

Barthes, Roland. 2000. Camera Lucida. Vintage.

Bhangu, Shagufta, Ally Bisshop, Sasha Engelmann, Germain Meulemans, Hugo Reinert, and Yesenia Thibault-Picazo. 2014. 'Anthropocene Curriculum → Feeling/Following: Creative Experiments and Material Play'. 23 November 2014. https://www.anthropocene-curriculum.org//contribution/feeling-following-creative-experiments-and-material-play.

Boyle, Colleen. 2013. 'Eyes of the Machine: The Role of Imaginative Processes in the Construction of Unseen Realities via Photographic Images'. In On the Verge of Photography: Imaging Beyond Representation, 211–36. ARTicle Press. https://researchrepository.rmit.edu.au/esploro/outputs/bookChapter/Eyes-of-the-machine-The-role/9921859663601341.

Bruno, Giuliana. 2014. Surface: Matters of Aesthetics, Materiality, and Media. Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press.

Caygill, Howard. 2021. 'IDSVA Lecture: Howard Caygill "Planetary Aesthetics" on Vimeo'. 2021. https://vimeo.com/617015274.

Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari. 1996. What Is Philosophy? Translated by Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell III. Columbia University Press.

Flusser, Vilém. 2020. Towards a philosophy of photography. Reaktion Books.

Grosz, Elizabeth. 2008. Chaos, Territory, Art: Deleuze and the Framing of the Earth. Columbia University Press.

Kinsey, Cadence. 2020. 'Fluid Dynamics: On the Representation of Water and Discourses of the Digital'. Art History 43 (3): 510–37. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8365.12483.

Leslie, Esther. 2016. Liquid Crystals: The Science and Art of a Fluid Form. First Edition. Reaktion Books.

Lindsey, Rebecca. 2007. 'Arctic Reflection: Clouds Replace Snow and Ice as Solar Reflector'. NASA Earth Observatory. 31 January 2007. https://earthobservatory.nasa.gov/features/ArcticReflector.

Nail, Thomas. 2021. Theory of the Earth. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.

Manovich, Lev. 2020. Cultural Analytics. The MIT Press.

Nikolić, Mirko. 2018. 'Apparatus x Assemblage'. New Materialism. 28 March 2018. https://newmaterialism.eu/almanac/a/apparatus-x-assemblage.html.

Photography Off the Scale: Technologies and Theories of the Mass Image. 2021. Edinburgh University Press. https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3366/j.ctv2dgc8nw.

Parikka, Jussi, N. Katherine Hayles, Peter Krapp, Rita Raley, and Samuel Weber. 2015. A Geology of Media. University of Minnesota Press. https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/j.ctt13x1mnj.

Parikka, Jussi, and Tomáš Dvořák. 2021 "Introduction: On the Scale, Quantity and Measure of Images." In Photography Off the Scale: Technologies and Theories of the Mass Image, edited by Jussi Parikka and Tomáš Dvořák, 1–22. Edinburgh University Press. http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3366/j.ctv2dgc8nw.6.

Sauzet, Sofie. 2018. 'Phenomena — Agential Realism'. New Materialism. 13 March 2018. https://newmaterialism.eu/almanac/p/phenomena-agential-realism.html.

Sontag, Susan. 2014. On Photography. Penguin UK.

Tagg, John. 2009. The Disciplinary Frame: Photographic Truths and the Capture of Meaning. NED-New edition. University of Minnesota Press. https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/j.ctttv1qh.

Woolridge, Duncan. 2018. 'John MacLean, Outthinking the Rectangle'. 1000 Words. 2018. https://www.1000wordsmag.com/john-maclean/.

https://doi.org/10.37522/pby68y16