

Hope is an Anti-Inflammatory

Liz Orton

02.10

18.10

Kirsty Badenoch

Putting together this exhibition has been wonderfully personal, talking with you in your studio and rummaging through your archives over many months. This show has ended up not as one specific project, but a drawing together of many different threads over years. There are ideas that relate to health and care, and many blurry bits that sit between categories – things that don't quite fit in or exist in the marginalia. One of the pieces in this show that you haven't shown before is the series of botanic photographs. Could you say a little about that piece of work?

[Ref: 3. Hope Is an Anti-Inflammatory]

That seems both awful and uncomfortably appropriate in the context of your work as an artist?

Yes and I felt directly how practices of categorisation affect lived experience. The botanical images which you asked about were made over a very long time period. They were made in my head, while I was in bed, long before they actually materialised, as two trains of thought slowly converged. One came directly out of my experience of illness, of being a horizontal subject. I felt this horizontality acutely, as a physical, a psychological and also a conceptual position.

Liz Orton

Thank you. I actually haven't shown any of this work before. I haven't shown work for over six years as I haven't been well enough. My practice has never been particularly personal so this is a real pivot for me, and not an easy one. Although the work has arisen from personal experience, I prefer to think of it as not being autobiographical as such, but about wider social and critical concerns.

You mention categorisation, which has long been an interest of mine. I feel like photography has been historically complicit in producing and fixing all sorts of social and institutional categories, in creating forms of order. Of course, this can be helpful in making sense of the world, but I am always curious about how those categories can be loosened, or questioned or completely undone. I am interested in unfixing structures of knowledge to reveal something of how they were made in the first place.

As a bit of an aside, my original diagnosis, after numerous tests, was "Medically Unexplained Symptoms". It is a category of miscellany, of things that can't be explained by other categories, a category outside of categorisation. It made me feel more ill.

I was already interested in how photography as a technology and a visual discipline is founded on the privilege of a vertical subject – a stable, upright figure who is both inside and outside the image. The horizon was the subject of my MA Photography dissertation – and then suddenly I was this horizon, a body confined to a bed. Horizontal subjects, nearly always women, are rarely protagonists – they are usually passive, erotic, mad, ill or asleep. From my bed, where I was stuck sometimes for weeks, I wanted to dismantle this verticality, to reclaim the image of horizontality and not be its victim.

And then there was the book itself, Rochford's Book of Houseplants, pages of which I use in the work. It had been my Mum's book and someone put it on the table by my bed to protect it from all the tea-rings I was making. I moved about the house a lot, sleeping in different places, depending on the season and how ill I was and who was at home. The book came with me. It has a lot of photographs, taken in that classic natural history style, where nature is staged and becomes decontextualized, like a specimen. I noticed that the landscape photographs had been rotated by 90° to fit the format of the book, and I saw myself in this gesture, a reorientation from upright to sideways.

There's something incredibly potent about this. You use the word specimen. I was thinking about the question of agency - your own agency being removed, against the

agency of the photographer out in the field, or your gaze capturing an image. Is that something you were trying to get beyond? As a photographer – the traditional agent – suddenly becoming the subject, there's a loss of agency, and a vulnerability.

In the photographs, the plants appear almost hygienic in the way the photograph has been constructed, they're all on these clean backgrounds. And everything's been prepared for them to be this – this perfect specimen – removed from their environment. They've been removed from their relations with other plants and there's something very humbling and emotive about that.

When you talk about moving around different rooms, I think about both you and the plants and the sensitivity to sunlight and position. When you get a new house plant, you have to work out where in the house it can flourish. There are usually a few attempts where you realise, oh, there's a draught here, or the afternoon sun is way too strong here, you suddenly become hyper aware of these tiny environmental shifts, and how they affect your well-being.

The plants in the same room as me usually ended up dying! I was sensitive to light, and the curtains were often half-closed. The room was like a sun-dial, as a band of light moved around the walls. Eventually, there weren't any plants in the room I was in because they couldn't thrive there.

I like your observation about the images, the way they are very standardised and clinical, so that there is a loss of agency on the part of the subject. Their isolation diminishes them somehow.

The text that you've used with these images, it also challenges the relationship between the body and the page, again between the vertical and horizontal. Where does the text come from?

There are two different sequences of text, which run across the images. One is based on an email thread about an access rider, which is an agreement between an employer and a worker around their access needs. It's particularly used to take care of needs

around chronic illness, disability and neurodiversity. I was having an email exchange with an art institution about what my needs would be for a freelance job. Initially they were supportive, but then there was a point where this flipped into resistance and ultimately refusal and withdrawal. And that's reflected in the text, which is an embellished version of this dialogue. It's an institutional critique around how organisations engage with an ill body. When the institution itself becomes threatened by the needs of a body, it pulls back. The body is present in the work, but not visible.

It's very striking this duality, of the vulnerable somehow being a threat. Where are the boundaries and who has power in this situation? Again, there is the question of agency and intent. It feels like there's a real chasm there.

I think the tension between care, restraint and discomfort also comes across very strongly in the photograph of the body on the table. It is a much more physical human body that you're showing in that piece.

[Ref: 4. Every Body is an Archive]

That photograph is from a project I did, about medical care and imaging, before I got ill. I had been thinking a lot about thresholds within a medical setting, the point where care has an insistence that verges on force or coercion. This person on the table is being held, tenderly but also firmly, because they have to be still for the medical image to be made. It is heavily cropped, a deliberate violence, if you like, to the subject, so we can only see a convergence of body parts, organised around this tension.

Exactly. We are very close up to the bed, and the bed is also like a table of some sort.

The sense of pressure in the image is not only physical but regulatory and architectural, as is the practice of medicine itself.

It's such a powerful image. And you see much more directly than in 'Hope is An Anti-Inflammatory' the relationship between the vertical body and the horizontal body, through

the clarity of the black and white of the image. What might first be perceived as care and help changes, as we're not quite sure where the pressure lies. There is something both supportive and gentle about that hand underneath the leg, but there's also a pressing down and a tension in the patient. You can just make out their hand gripping. This grip feels anchoring, but there's also tightness or pain or an intake of breath. The lines of hands have a synergy with the verticals of the base of the 'bed table'. It's very challenging. As if you as the viewer are standing and observing this act happening, there's intimacy and intrusion: they feel very, very close. You can feel how personal these spaces and moments are.

That is such a beautiful observation, about intimacy and intrusion, thank you. Yes, I would say intimate but not personal. For a patient there are always boundaries to care. There is always a limit – I speak personally as well as institutionally - and ultimately, it's the ill body that bends. There is a fundamental inequality that is social as much as medical.

By the way, the bed looks like a table because it is a table! The work was made by actors, re-enacting or maybe rehearsing the experience of a patient, which I presented to them as a transcript of an interview that I had done with a patient. The patient had described being positioned, being arranged, instructed to be still, to hold their breath. This work also comes back to something to do with photography that always interests me, which is its complicity with various systems. I think through the photographic process, it is possible to draw attention to this, not just what the image shows us, but how the discipline operates. I don't know if that makes sense?

It does, and it also links back to something you said earlier, about the idea of moving away from photography as an objectification or an imposed view. And maybe away from the idea of the singular gaze and towards these multiple perspectives, or multiple gazes and working with someone else's experience. There's a variety of viewpoints in your work in general - there's the eyes of the subject, of the patient, of the viewer, and the carer. And

then our understanding that this is a re-enactment. There seem to be many different possible perspectives and stories layered into the image, experiences being retold. And you are also bringing up the idea of diagnosis.

Something similar also comes through in the yellow work made up of multiple images, of something appearing to struggle to come together. It feels domestic but again it feels like it might have something to do with diagnosis?

[Ref: 5. High Res Jackets]

Yes diagnosis in the sense that I am trying to find an explanation for things that feel outside of my control. That work could be seen as a refusal of the idea that a single photograph is sufficient to contain its subject. This might sound a bit dramatic, but I see photographic representation itself as a kind of trauma. It can be so violent, so exposing, especially now that we live in an era where everything might become a subject, where there is no privacy. When a photograph is about grief, or death, or vulnerability how does it avoid causing more harm, how does it push against the visual economy of suffering? Sometimes I feel as though the solution is to not to take photographs at all, but that would be too easy!

Yes, you are certainly turning towards the problem rather than away from it in this work. Can you say more about how and why you made it?

I was at my Dad's house trying to help look after him, which itself was challenging as he had dementia and wasn't able to understand that I was ill myself. The doorbell rang and there were four men in high viz jackets with a hospital-from-home bed. They were heavily booted and it felt invasive. It felt as if the house was being turned inside out by their jackets. Their fluorescence made it feel like a public or a municipal space. I can remember, one of them was on the phone saying "I am just doing a delivery", and I felt a rage because his delivery was my grief.

They began to move all the furniture around, to fit the bed in the dining room. They had moved the table, and were about to pick up the plant, when I asked them to stop so I

photograph it. There was a sense of emergency about it. I was trying to preserve something.

It feels claustrophobic. There's something again about the exchange of the table for a bed. It's prominent in the other image, but here it is part of an unseen back-story. There is a sense of a domestic space, but then this harsh yellow light.

That's such an observant connection between the two images, between beds and tables, and one which I hadn't consciously made. The hospital-from-home bed was the same size as the dining room table, and replaced it exactly. We were all re-arranged by the arrival of the bed. My dad was sleeping where he used to eat dinner, the table was moved into the carer's room, so the carer moved into my room and I moved into my Dad's room. And we all ate in the kitchen. Perhaps something of that re-arrangement is reflected in the composition of the image.

The violence of the colour adds another layer of discomfort, a feeling of heightened senses. It has the feeling of a neon strip light, that exposes everything.

Yes, it's harsh and quite unforgiving. I'm concerned with how photographs record, but also collude with or resist systems of care.

There is something functional about it too. There's a job to be done. It feels task orientated. There's no space or time for feelings in this. And, also there is a reality: this is a plant that is real, that does exist.

I am also thinking about the timescale of the life of your father, and the context of his home, the impossibility of putting all of this in one frame, that perhaps you are saying there is too much to contain. Maybe there's something in this image that negates or rejects that idea of subjects that can be totally captured.

Yes, I would completely agree with that. In this work I am pushing against the idea of a central, stable subject or focal point that is so integral to photography, creating a visual space that is not really coherent or logical. The fragmentation of the image – so that it overlaps and intersects with itself – for me begins to disrupt the ordered space of photography. I definitely see the way that

nature or the body is composed by images as political, in the sense that it is always, in some way, about power.

I definitely feel that in this work. It is also a real contrast with the found imagery from the book where everything is playing by the rules. Where these subjects have been given white space around them, they're totally visible and have been 'museumified'.

Yes. I am hesitating about using the word 'control' but I think it is the right word. I think that something happens with this type of photograph, the specimen - it enacts a kind of separation of humans from nature. We become detached from the subject, which belongs to the white space of science, or taxonomy or institutional display. It brings me back to photography itself, how it has taken us, historically, out of nature, out of this world, by casting us as the observer. It's this position that makes us feel like we have some control, which of course, has ended up being incredibly damaging.

Yes, which I think is very topical now. We are in a period where we're trying to work out how to get beyond the nature /culture separation that has haunted us for the last few hundred years, to think much more relationally, and understand ourselves as part of ecosystems. For me there's something in your approach that gestures towards some of these questions. There is bravery there. You are not the removed photographer, you let us into your bed, and your father's room. The works are part of your relationships and your own experience. And in the ones that aren't directly personal you have an empathy, or a version of your own experience that's able to talk with other's experiences.

Thank you for saying so. It's not a comfortable position for me, but I think at one point all I was doing was surviving, it was very isolating and part of me wants others to see what chronic illness can look like, and my experience is the only way I can do that. But I think I'd also counter that by saying that along with that invitation, there is also a limit. I am also seeking opacity and obscurity, which isn't something photography is very good at. When you were speaking then I was thinking about the word exposure, about photography's potential to over-expose. I am

seeking to balance this with self-protection. A lot has been written about photography in relation to illness. There is a feeling of invisibility with chronic illness that is acute, of being so unseen that it is almost like a loss of personhood, and photography seems to offer a route to visibility. It's not that straightforward for me, I am always thinking about what might be held back.

When I was very ill, I reached a kind of critical standstill. I ran out of language, and the space to think and be creative shrank down to almost nothing. I am addressing some of this now, even though I am generally much healthier. I think maybe I have gone off on a deviation...

Not at all, it's all connected, Liz, and I appreciate your openness. As we draw to a close, I wanted to ask you about the importance of time in your works. With the image of your father's room with a plant and the multi-perspective, there was an urgency there: an immediacy and a speed and a haste. Where something that had been there all the time was suddenly endangered, but the works of the birds you made on very different timescales, I think you said sometimes days or even weeks.

[Ref: 2. Wren (14), with Blackbird (25)]

Yes, these were made with a very different impulse, though also at my Dad's house, on his broken printer. The original photographs came from a found book - as a lot of my work does - to help people with dementia recognise birds, which my Dad loved to do. I re-photographed the wren and the blackbird, as these were the only two birds my Dad could readily identify, and digitally separated out the different colours and printed them as layers, one at a time, on top of each other. It was a very old, slow printer, and I would leave it and go off to do something else, often not printing the next layer until hours, days or even weeks later. Each time it went through the printer the paper moved, and the frame became more fractured, and the gaze of the birds multiplied. I enjoyed that the outcome wasn't really controllable, and that the technology of the printer, which is usually invisible, was becoming part of the image.

I think with photographs we constantly encounter the constraints of the surface - we almost get thrown back out of images, but I felt these layers letting me in. I began to think about these as 'chronic photographs', accumulations of time and memory. How might these things be contained or held within the material of an image?

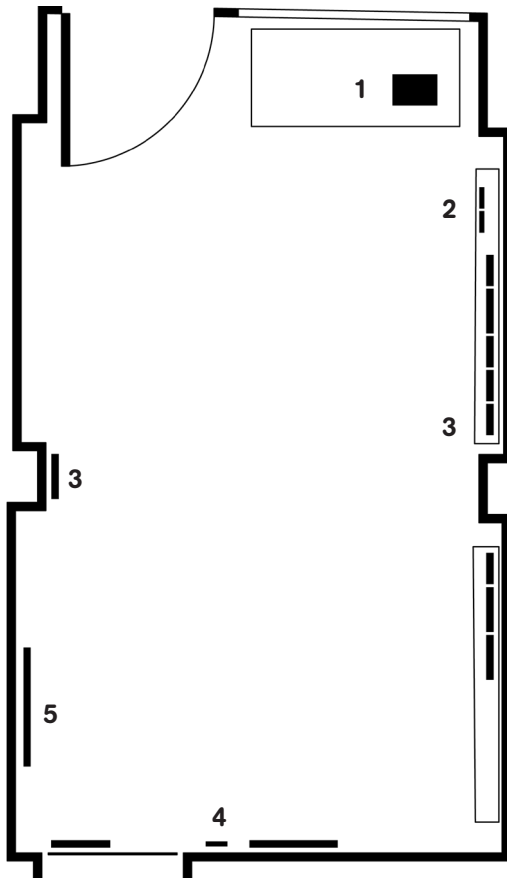
Only later did I read that the wren and blackbird are two of only a few species that feed the young of other species, that offer a kind of unconditional care. It seemed so appropriate, at a time when I was part of a circle of care, I was both carer and cared-for.

That's beautiful. In contrast to what you were saying earlier about separation and distance, these photographs bring us closer to something. There is this idea that pervades all your work, in which images themselves become ecologies for us to consider how a species or person is or isn't part of its environment. It invites a conversation about relations, context, habitat, and what we need to survive. When something becomes a specimen, removed from everything that keeps it alive and makes it what it is, then what is it?

I hadn't thought about it in those terms, but I think yes perhaps I am trying to do something reparative, or use a deconstructed photographic process to show a struggle or effort to change things.

Yes, and your work also seems to acknowledge that you're never going to be able to get that coherence. That was the thing itself before it was removed from the things that made it what it was, and there is a discrepancy between the different isolated parts.

Yeah, that's beautifully summarised. Things don't fit neatly together. There are always echoes and reverberations. Some people talk about photographs as if they are outside of the reality they refer to, and can provide an authoritative view, but I'm working with them as material objects that will always be open, unstable and multiple.



- 1 **Over Story**
2023
Silver gelatin/bromide photograph, walnut and art glass (27 x 19.5cm)
- 2 **Wren (14), with Blackbird (25)**
2024-2025
2 prints, various papers (14.5 x 10.5cm)
- 3 **Hope Is an Anti-Inflammatory**
2024-2025
16 book pages with artist text, walnut and art glass (27 x 18.5cm)
- 4 **Every Body is an Archive**
2019-2022

Photograph, Hahnemühle paper, walnut and art glass (51 x 38.5cm)

Photograph, Hahnemühle paper, walnut and art glass (31 x 24cm)

C-type lustre photograph, unframed (13 x 16cm)
- 5 **High Viz Jackets**
2025
11 photographs, yellow lighting gel, walnut and art glass (67cm x 46.5cm)

Liz Orton is a visual artist using photography, found material, text and performance to explore the politics and poetics of knowledge production. Her work engages widely with archives, both real and imagined, as a means to consider authorship, language and practices of care.

Liz was a Lecturer in Photography at London College of Communication, and Associate Artist with Performing Medicine but took time out from teaching in 2020 due to illness. She is the recipient of several awards including the Mead Fellowship, a UCL Challenge Award and a Wellcome Trust Arts award. She has published two artist books, including *Every Body is an Archive*, and is editor of the collection of essays *Becoming Image: Medicine and the Algorithmic Gaze*. In 2025 she founded a new arts and environment charity, Afield.

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Microscope is a tiny testing ground for art and ecology. It is somewhere between a workshop, a shopfront, a gallery and a living room. It invites creative practitioners working with ecology and environment to test, experiment and share their works-in-progress. Sometimes it hosts things to look at, eat or touch, sometimes there are jams and field re-mixings, sometimes people gather for conversations, read aloud from books or run workshops. Sometimes it's simply full of dirt.

Microscope is not-for-profit, and is hosted by Periscope. The exhibition programme is curated by Kirsty Badenoch, and the "Echolocation" field-and-sound programme by Daniel Rea.

microscope

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