

A Garden of Unplanted Species:
Andrew Dadson's Countervisuality of Weeds

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ABSTRACT

Weeds are ever-present within our natural and urban environments: growing through the cracks in the pavement, accompanying our gardens, and carpeting human-induced dereliction. Humans often, socially and linguistically, refer to them as a nuisance, but what if we instead viewed them as resilient, dynamic contributors to the sustainability of our planet, especially as we endure the increasingly severe environmental crisis? Negating these discriminating modes of visibility, this thesis argues that Vancouver artist Andrew Dadson's 2019 series of photographs is a countervisuality through strategies of reportage, gentle earth interventions and high-resolution photography. With reference to the work of scholars working to decenter the human while raising the agentic capacities of nonhuman entities, including Donna Haraway, Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, N. Katherine Hayles, Michael Marder, and Michael Pollan, Dadson's work argues for the resuscitation of weeds into a renewed reality and legitimacy. His photographs offer a liminal positionality between documentary and artifice, reminiscent of Jeff Wall's contribution to Vancouver photoconceptualism, while his enactment of painting plants – corporeally suffusing the landscape – echoes the gentle gestures of land artists Richard Long and Andy Goldsworthy. By using advanced photographic technology that captures weeds in hyper-resolution and definition, I argue with Joanna Zylińska's notion of nonhuman photography that Dadson's works invite the spectator to imagine walking the horizontal ground, brushing against the soft, spindly fibers, and breathing the same oxygen that maintains weed life.

RESUMÉ

Les mauvaises herbes sont omniprésentes dans les environnements naturels et urbains : elles poussent à travers les trottoirs fissurés, accompagnent nos jardins, et tapissent des endroits abandonnés. Les humains les considèrent souvent, autant au niveau social que linguistique, comme une nuisance, mais qu'est-ce qui se passerait si nous les percevons plutôt comme contributrices résilientes et dynamiques à la durabilité de notre planète, surtout dans un contexte où la crise environnementale s'avère de plus en plus grave? Rejetant ces perceptions discriminantes, cette thèse propose que la série de photos de 2019 de Andrew Dadson, un artiste basé à Vancouver, utilise des stratégies de reportage, des earth interventions et de la photographie à haute résolution afin de créer de la « countervisualité ». Faisant référence au travail de chercheurs qui visent décentrer l'humain tout en reconnaissant l'agency des non-humains, y compris Donna Haraway, Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, N. Katherine Hayles, Michael Marder, et Michael Pollan, le travail de Dadson cherche à recarder les mauvaises herbes afin de leur attribuer une nouvelle légitimité. Ses photos occupent une position liminale entre le documentaire et l'artifice, rappelant la contribution de Jeff Wall au photoconceptualisme vancouverois, tandis que l'acte de peindre des plantes – et ainsi d'imprégner corporellement le paysage – fait écho au gestes délicats des land artists Richard Long et Andy Goldsworthy. En utilisant une technologie photographique avancée qui capte les mauvaises herbes en hyper-résolution et définition, je propose, en adoptant la notion de photographie non-humaine de Joanna Zylińska, que les œuvres de Dadson invitent le spectateur à s'imaginer marcher sur le sol horizontal, effleurer les fibres doux et filiformes, et respirer l'oxygène qui maintient la vie des mauvaises herbes.

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Every step of this thesis-writing enterprise has been, to say the least, not what I expected. I knew that it would be a great challenge – and it was – but, I had not anticipated the twists and turns that occasionally steered me down dead-end paths along the way. Last summer, for example, I was reading books about gentrification and urban ecology thinking I was investigating several of Dadson’s series ranging from 2014-2019; in the end, it was photography that became the crucial key to my thesis and that realization did not arrive to myself, nor Professor Ross, until much later. What remained consistent throughout, however, was my commitment to including Andrew Dadson in my thesis, an artist I’ve been studying since 2017. It is for this reason that I would first like to acknowledge Andrew’s generosity and support throughout my writing process, our exhibition *Green Piece* (2019), and our subsequent projects. Thank you, also, to Tobin Gibson, the director of Unit 17, who mentored me in the organization of *Green Piece* and for supporting me both professionally and personally.

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INTRODUCTION

According to George Usher's 1966 *Dictionary of Botany*, a 'weed' is defined as, "a plant growing where it is not wanted by man."¹ This specialized volume broadly defines plant-related terminology, reducing highly complicated concepts to single sentences. While Usher acknowledges that plant taxonomy is a highly biased and complicated field due to its tendency to be reductive and suggestive of the author's stance on the given topic,² his decision to proceed using this one-sentence-methodology is an example of how humans continue to diminish nonhuman entities into confining categorization despite acknowledging its biased propensity. The reiterations of such methodologies (e.g. reducing complex plant species into basic terms) over long periods condition future generations to accept and re-enact these very methodologies. By virtue of Canadian artist Andrew Dadson's series of inkjet prints from 2019³ that represent weeds through paint and specific photographic processes, my thesis argues that Dadson's prints are a countervisuality that claim the right to look at weeds; the right to look at what Usher defines as "a plant growing where it is not wanted by man." By countervisuality – a term I will more expand upon below – I mean the "attempt to reconfigure visibility as a whole"⁴ by means of specific strategies or tactics that work to deconstruct hegemonic systems and reveal what has been written out from the "visualization of history."⁵ Dadson's series features large-scale and high-resolution images that place weeds as significant entities worthy of planetary acclaim. The series includes six inkjet prints; however, for the purpose of this thesis, I will focus on two works: *Black Medic and Foxtail Barley (Medicago lupulina and Hordeum jubatum) Pink*, 2019

¹ George Usher, *Dictionary of Botany* (London: Constable and Company Ltd., 1966), 398.

² Usher, *Dictionary of Botany*, v.

³ The series is not formally named.

⁴ Nicholas Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visibility* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 24.

⁵ Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look*, xv.

(fig. 1) and *Red Clover (Trifolium pratense) Blue*, 2019 (fig. 2). While these particular works feature plant species that vary in dimension (between 15 and 50 cm), the works themselves are both similarly large-scale (up to 190cm).

Andrew Dadson

Andrew Dadson (b. 1980) is a Vancouver-based artist who graduated from Emily Carr University of Art + Design in 2003. His work has been exhibited nationally, most recently in Toronto at Daniel Faria Gallery (2019),⁶ and internationally, most recently in Seoul at 313 Art Project (2019).⁷ In both Toronto and Seoul, Dadson exhibited a few works from the latest series; however, they premiered at his solo exhibition, *Green Piece*, at Vancouver gallery Unit 17 (2019).⁸ While Dadson refers to himself as a painter, his works engage with various media including: painting on canvas, painting on the leaves and stems of indoor plants, 16mm film, and still images of what the artist refers to as “painted landscapes.” Dadson’s painted landscapes are generally large-scale inkjet prints, but these prints are the product of a two-step process: first, Dadson sprays a monochromatic coat of biodegradable paint upon the landscape capturing a section of land or a grouping of plants; and second, the painted landscape is documented through photography, either using film or digital technology. For all his painted landscapes, Dadson decides how and what to paint by composing the shot *through* the camera’s framing. The two inkjet prints this thesis investigates employ this very process.

Dadson initiated this practice of painted landscapes in 2003 with a series of lawn paintings. He began by sectioning off residential lawns with make-shift stencils, or by following

⁶ Contemporary Art Gallery (2017), Polygon Gallery (2017), and the Vancouver Art Gallery (2015)

⁷ Galleria Franco Noero, Turin (2017) and Art Pacours, Basel (2016). Dadson is also a finalist for the 2020 Artisti per Frescobaldi Art Prize in Tuscany.

⁸ I curated *Green Piece*, which ran from September 28 – November 20, 2020, and had the privilege of working alongside Dadson during the photographic process. My understanding of Dadson’s process is the product of working with the artist for two years leading up to the opening of this exhibition.

the curvature of garden beds, and spray-painting the sections in white or black paint. To document this happening, Dadson would situate himself at an upward angle looking down at the painted section and capture the scene using predominantly film photography (fig. 3 for *Black Painted Lawn with White Fence*). After 2006, he departed from painting low-pile lawns and began to focus on landscapes with far more robust dimensionality. Some of these landscapes would be situated within urban sites such as alleys and junkyards, or natural landscapes featuring bushes and trees (fig. 4 for *Black Yard* which documents the back of artist Jeff Wall's studio). Photographing these spaces would require him to utilize different techniques; Dadson would shoot these landscapes straight-on, at a perpendicular angle to the scene. In 2014, Dadson built upon these techniques and created a series that emerged from several happenings within a construction site in Richmond, British Columbia, a city outside of Vancouver. This site, comprising of large, sloping hills of silt and sand amongst heavy machinery and the foundations for buildings, became the home of several species of wild grasses. Here, Dadson painted the hillsides in a coat of black paint (fig. 5 for *Black Hill*). For this series, Dadson utilized more advanced photographic technology, allowing him to encapsulate a larger surface area of space within one singular, large-scale image. For his later works, including the works I focus on within this thesis, Dadson employed an external team of photographers and editors in order to achieve the high-resolution and level of precision that can only be accomplished with the most advanced technology available.

The two works I examine in this thesis were created over the summer of 2019 within an empty lot located at the 2950 block of West 4th Avenue in Vancouver (fig. 6 for a photograph of the lot from the sidewalk). This site, the former location of a chain restaurant, was – and maybe still is – a transient space where unplanted species flourish and temporarily encourage new

ecosystems. These works were initiated by physically marking the lot with biodegradable earth pigments, much like the processes involved in his previous series. In these works, however, the painted sections are no more than a foot in dimension. Highly detailed images are then stitched (or layered) together using Photoshop and other advanced editing software and later produced on a large scale. These works mark a specific moment in the lifespan of unplanted species existing within transient sites such as construction sites or empty lots. One element that sets this series apart from his previous work is the way he has recorded the didactic text. Before, Dadson would simply state that the work was an inkjet print (figs. 3-5 for the didactic texts of his older works); instead, Dadson now lists the work as an inkjet print in addition to listing the materials visible within the work ranging from the plant species, the pigment derivative, and the paint binder (figs. 1 and 2). In all, Dadson's most recent works, and particularly the two works featured in this thesis, claim the right to look by placing weeds, a plant condemned through discriminating modes of visibility, as a countervisuality through artistic strategies that strengthen the presence of weeds, allowing them to be understood as fundamental contributors to the sustainability of our planet and further, as capable beings that have the ability to adapt and thrive through human-induced environmental change.

Visibility and Countervisuality

Before I explain the contents of the three chapters that support my central argument, I want to discuss here visual culture theorist Nicholas Mirzoeff's notions of visibility and countervisuality, which thematically and theoretically underpin each chapter. Mirzoeff employs the controversial Scottish historian Thomas Carlyle's (1795-1881) coined definition of visibility which was conceived in tandem with the French Revolution and through notions of a "moral

imperialism.”⁹ He turns to Carlyle, as opposed to more recent conceptions of vision and visuality (e.g. Hal Foster and Erwin Panofsky), because it was Carlyle who envisioned the ‘hero’ as a visual subject, a strategy, and an agent of sight.¹⁰ What Mirzoeff finds productive in Carlyle’s visuality through the ‘hero’ figure is the idea that “any claim to such subjectivity had to pass by visuality.”¹¹ In other words, visuality had a key role in the forward momentum of imperialism and as Mirzoeff suggests, these notions are still relevant today.

To Mirzoeff, visuality is “not the visible but it is twice ineluctable, unavoidable, inevitable.”¹² Visuality is both the medium for the transmission and dissemination of authority and acts as a conduit between those in authority and those subject to that authority.¹³ Visuality, or “the visualization of history,” can be understood as an imaginary practice because what is being fashioned into the visualization itself (e.g. images, text) is too grand and too complicated for any one person to perceive.¹⁴ Simply put, the visuality of history acts as a sieve or a filter through which to comprehend a full picture. Visuality is composed of a series of operations including: (1) classifying, naming, categorizing, and defining; (2) separating these defined groups as a means of social organization; and (3) the separated groups appear right, dutiful and hence, aesthetic.¹⁵ These operations, in conjunction, create a sustained “aura of authority” that perpetuates itself even without the presence of the authoritative figure.¹⁶

Mirzoeff’s book *The Right to Look* (2011), traces a historical genealogy of visuality in order to understand the ways it is a key component in the “formation of Western

⁹ Mirzoeff, “On Visuality,” *Journal of Visual Culture* 5, no. 1 (2006): 54.

¹⁰ Mirzoeff, “On Visuality,” 54.

¹¹ Mirzoeff, “On Visuality,” 54.

¹² Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look*, xiii.

¹³ Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look*, xv.

¹⁴ Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look*, 2.

¹⁵ Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look*, 2-3.

¹⁶ Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look*, 7.

historiography.”¹⁷ He selects three dominant complexes – the productions of a set of social organizations and processes – to investigate both the visibility and the countervisibility that created, and continue to create, these entangled histories: the plantation complex (1660-1860), the imperial complex (1860-1945), and the military-industrial complex (1945-present).¹⁸ By utilizing the imperial complex as an example, we can begin to understand what visibility is. Discursive visibility became a dominant element of the imperial complex where terms such as ‘primitive’ and ‘cultured’ were conceived by the colonizers to perpetuate a hierarchy of civilization.¹⁹ Further, the missionaries working to convert the colonized to Christianity employed affective visual and discursive techniques to make the colonized feel sinful, deficient, and desiring of the consumer goods of Western civilization.²⁰ In other words, the hierarchical relationship between the colonizer and the colonized was developed through visibility, and visibility in itself justified the imperial theory of domination.

Assemblages of countervisibility challenge the complexities of visibility, and they may be neither visual nor realistic, but rather “visualized goals, strategies, and imagined forms of singularity and collectivity.”²¹ As visibility’s authority strives to appear factual and just while at the same time exercising modes of exploitation (e.g. slave plantation, fascism, the war on terror), countervisibility exposes what has been written out and “proposes an alternative.”²² The multiple forms of countervisibility emerge within “intimate and plural relationships to [authority], ranging from opposition to neutrality” and they are not necessarily politically radical or progressive.²³ Countervisibility is the claim for the right to look and that right “is the attempt to shape an

¹⁷ Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look*, xiv.

¹⁸ Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look*, 6.

¹⁹ Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look*, 14.

²⁰ Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look*, 15.

²¹ Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look*, 4.

²² Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look*, 5.

²³ Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look*, 24.

autonomous realism that is not only outside authority's process but antagonist to it.

Countervisuality is the assertion of the right to look, challenging the law that sustains visibility's authority in order to justify its own sense of 'right'.²⁴ Returning to the imperial complex as an example, the countervisuality that emerged to oppose the autocratic authority of the missionaries included both indigenous visibility and antifascist neorealism. Mirzoeff points to a scene in the 1966 film, *The Battle of Algiers* as an example of antifascist neorealism because it reveals the interior of a torture room, something that was supposed to remain unseen and something that countered the imperial worldview.²⁵

Three-Chapter Structure

My thesis turns to Dadson's most recent series of inkjet prints from 2019, particularly *Black Medic and Foxtail Barley (Medicago lupulina and Hordeum jubatum) Pink and Red Clover (Trifolium pratense) Blue*, as a countervisuality that claims the right to look at weeds, plants that are predominantly overlooked but should instead be recognized as important contributors to the sustainability of our planet. To support this argument, my thesis is structured using three axes of investigation. My first chapter looks at weeds themselves as significant contributors to the livability of our planet; second, I look at Dadson's artistic strategy of developing a "quasi-record" of weeds through modes of documentation and gentle intervention; and third, I focus on how the weeds are captured using advanced technology which allows them to be rendered in high-resolution and all-encompassing within the frame. I outline these chapters in more detail in the remaining part of this section.

In chapter one, I make a claim for the significance of weeds using a similar methodology as Mirzoeff's conception of his three complexes in *The Right to Look*. Through a historical

²⁴ Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look*, 25.

²⁵ Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look*, 46.

overview that looks at the linguistic and social conceptions of the weed from the 18th century to the present, I argue that authority figures (e.g. lexicographers, botanists, city officials) have conceived of weeds through a visuality established with biological and aesthetic categorizations which are often reductive and over-simplistic. Questioning that authority, this chapter also claims weeds’ “right to existence”²⁶ by demonstrating their resilience and adaptation within sites of human-induced destruction. The final section of chapter one establishes the qualities that make precarious entities like weeds pertinent contributors to the planet – including plant agency and plant intelligence – both of which become especially relevant as we (increasingly) endure the environmental crisis.

Chapter two aims to describe the way that Dadson’s series *redistributes* the sensible through the artistic strategy of creating what I call a “quasi-record” of weeds. What makes Dadson’s series quasi – or partially – a record of weeds is by virtue of the way the works use techniques that blur the division between the documentary and the artificial, and between the objective and the aesthetic; as a result, this intermediary posture challenges the predominantly discursive visuality of weeds that I outlined in chapter one. Similar to the artists of the “Vancouver School” of conceptual photography and particularly Jeff Wall, Dadson’s series also fuse modes of classical reportage and complex staging creating what Wall refers to *near documentary* and *blatant artifice*. I look at Wall’s work *Mimic* from 1982 (fig. 10), a re-staging of a racist gesture he observed on the street, to illustrate and define what *near documentary* means in relation to the “quasi-record.” In the case of Dadson’s series, the documentary aspect pertains to the way he uses the Linnaean system of binomial nomenclature (classification taxonomy referring to animal, plant, and minerals) developed by Swedish botanist Carolus

²⁶ Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look*, 4.

Linnaeus in 1735; while Linnaean systematics became the dominant mode of classifying species, Michel Foucault believed that it situated nature “only through the grid of denominations,” meaning that the entanglement of words, in many ways, *created* species.²⁷ Further, in this chapter I will trace a short history (via Daston and Galison) of the modes of mechanical scientific objectivity emerging out of predominantly the 19th century to the present, to look at how scientific objectivity today becomes a hybrid between art and science and between the objective and the aesthetic (in itself, a “quasi-record”). Finally, I will look at the way that Dadson, like Wall, utilized artificial aspects to further challenge the visibility of weeds through gentle intervention – in this case, painting the weeds in a biodegradable paint; here, I look at land artists practicing from the 1960s to the present including Richard Long and Andy Goldsworthy whose works utilized gentle earth gestures to make present what is already visible in nature.

Chapter three looks at the advanced photographic process of emphasizing weeds through high-resolution and large-scale imagery. Mirzoeff states that “the place of visualization has literally and metaphorically continued to distance itself from the subject being viewed” and this notion has been further perpetuated with aerial photography and satellites as a practical means of domination and surveillance.²⁸ Dadson’s series, then, is a countervisuality through the implementation of the most advanced photographic technology available that performs in an opposite way: by layering high-resolution focus plates and stitching those layers together during post-production, small sections of weeds can be confronted as their own large-scale jungle terrains. To support this argument, I look at Joanna Zylińska’s article, “The Creative Power of Nonhuman Photography,” which argues that it is, in fact, “the nonhuman aspect that

²⁷ Samuel J Kessler, “Systematization, Theology, and the Baroque *Wunderkammern*: Seeing Nature After Linnaeus,” *The Heythrop Journal* 58, no. 3 (May 2017): 440.

²⁸ Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look*, 17.

photography's creative, or world-making, side can be identified.”²⁹ In particular, her work on decentering the human by seeing the parallel between photography and the image-making perception of animals, plants, and microorganisms (reminiscent of Hayles, Marder, and Pollan). Dadson's images also employ a specific perspective where the picture plane is so vertical that the weeds become a spatially-equivalent force to the human spectator, opposing the way humans naturally encounter weeds within a horizontal and downward-looking plane. Mirzoeff suggests that the right to look is not about seeing; instead, it is a mutual recognition between subjects that claims autonomy rather than individualism or voyeurism.³⁰ It is in this way that the inkjet prints become a countervisuality that opposes autocratic authority through hyper-detailed imagery, large-scale, and a confronting perspective.

CHAPTER 1: THE SIGNIFICANCE OF WEEDS

1.1: Introduction

Chapter one aims to show the ways in which weeds have been traditionally overlooked or discarded by humans and should instead be understood as valuable contributors to the livability of environments at large. I first provide a historical overview of the linguistic and social developments of the concept of the weed evolving from the 18th century to the present. I then look at alternative modes of determining weeds through certain biological characteristics established by botanists and aesthetic assessments regulated by city officials. From there, I look at the dichotomy between domesticating nature and the qualities that make a weed invasive and powerful. In turn, I demonstrate that when the weed thrives within sites of human-induced destruction, it then becomes productive especially in our current moment of environmental crisis.

²⁹ Joanna Zylinska, “The Creative Power of Nonhuman Photography.” in *Nonhuman Photography*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 2017.

³⁰ Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look*, 1.

Further, I look at theories that support the undertaking of coexisting with weeds and other unruly entities. Finally, I reveal some contemporary notions of plant agency to look at the ways in which plants are capable and dynamic. Chapter one seeks to prove that weeds are pertinent contributors to our planet. This argumentation is crucial to the thesis's claim: it will support chapter two and three which look at Andrew Dadson's artistic strategies whose main productivity lies in their capacity to make invisible (weeds) visible and promote coexistence with all aspects of the natural world.

1.2: What is a 'Weed'?

When examining several dictionary definitions of the word 'weed' throughout history, some common themes emerge. Before I reveal three formal definitions of the term, it is important to note that English is the only major European language that has disconnected the word from its context; in contrast, the word for 'weed' in French, Spanish, German, and Italian is related to plants in some way.³¹ Perhaps this linguistic separation has further supported the division between plants and weeds. Historian Zachary J. S. Falck, who writes on weeds in relation to the development of 18th-and 19th-century America, speaks to the way in which colonizers and settlers referred to weeds. For them, the presence of weeds on American soil signified inhospitality and yet, in many cases, it also indicated the availability of land to cultivate.³² During the Revolutionary War (1775-1783), the 'weed' became a politically-inflected metaphor for certain categories of people; and it was during the Civil War (1861-1865), when both democrats and slaves were referred to as weeds by the opposition.³³ Around this time, American lexicographer Noah Webster (1758-1843) defined 'to weed' as both "to free from

³¹ Nina Edwards, *Weeds* (London: Reaktion Books Ltd, 2015), xii.

³² Zachary J. S. Falck, *Weeds: An Environmental History of Metropolitan America* (Pittsburgh: The University of Pittsburgh Press, 2010), 7-8.

³³ Falck, *Weeds*, 9.

noxious plants” but also “to root out vice.”³⁴ The latter definition suggests that the act of weeding is more generally tied to the removal of something perceived as immoral.

200 years later, we can witness the definition morph. In 1966, George Usher referred to a weed as, “a plant growing where is it not wanted by man” in his *Dictionary of Botany*.³⁵ His definition points to the human, yet also stresses that there are pinpointed sites where plants may grow that are considered unsuitable. Today, Merriam-Webster’s definition states that a ‘weed’ is “a plant that is not valued where it is growing and is usually of vigorous growth, especially: one that tends to overgrow or choke out more desirable plants.”³⁶ The three formal definitions listed above propose that weeds are plants that: (a) exist in spaces that we, at least in the West,³⁷ deem inappropriate and (b) are dangerous and threaten the health of plants we value. In all three cases, there is a definite relationship and dependency between human beings and the existence of weeds. As cultural historian Nina Edwards eloquently states, “weeds only exist in relation to ourselves.”³⁸

Since the late 19th century, cities and municipalities have also attempted to create their own definitions of the weed and in these cases, based on particular aesthetic assessments. In 1899, District of Columbia developed a ‘weed law’ that prohibited unplanted flora of four or more inches in height.³⁹ While this definition may seem arbitrary, similar laws are being enforced today. City bylaws in Houston, Texas, for example, have determined the illegality of weeds stating that “any uncultivated vegetable growth taller than nine inches” is considered “objectionable, unsightly, and unsanitary matter” and those plants that fall within this parameter

³⁴ Falck, *Weeds*, 8.

³⁵ Usher, *Dictionary of Botany*, 398.

³⁶ “Weed,” Merriam-Webster, accessed January 12, 2020, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/weed>.

³⁷ Throughout this thesis, I refer to humans (rather than nonhumans) and I need to disclaim that I am predominantly referring to those who are of the Western imagination.

³⁸ Edwards, *Weeds*, 7.

³⁹ Falck, *Weeds*, 4.

must be eradicated.⁴⁰ Like the examples from the dictionary, these categorical models perpetuate the relationship and dependency between humans and weeds in the way that a plant only becomes a weed if it possesses human-determined characteristics. As Falck states, “plants’ biologies and people’s judgments do not necessarily neatly intersect,”⁴¹ indicating that the natural and biological tendencies of certain plants may not coincide with the needs of a human (e.g. gardens, lawns).

1.3: Control and Invasion

Writer Richard Mabey surmises that the working definitions for weeds *are* their cultural story and it is within these classification systems that conceptual boundaries are drawn between nature and culture and between wildness and domestication.⁴² These boundaries become tangible within private residential gardens and public green spaces. Weeds were, at one time, considered useful to humans; they were sources of nourishment, they could be used to treat many different ailments, their fibers could be woven into cloth, and more.⁴³ Author Pamela Jones attributes the shift from use into disuse to the Industrial Revolution (1740 up to 1840) where modern medicine erased some of the traditions associated with weed use.⁴⁴ This time of origin also aligns with the 18th-century dictionary definition I pointed to where ‘weeding’ meant removing the unwanted and the undesirable: “to free from noxious plants” but also “to root out vice.” It further aligns with landscapes of the home, when they became – and still are today – a signifier of the formation and performance of individual, familial, and community identities, which can

⁴⁰ Richard Mabey, *Weeds: How vagabond plants gatecrashed civilisation and changed the way we think about nature* (London: Profile Books Ltd, 2010), 10.

⁴¹ Falck, 4.

⁴² Mabey, *Weeds*, 5.

⁴³ Pamela Jones *Just Weeds: History, Myths, and Uses* (New York: Prentice Hall Press, 1991). Zachary J. S. Falck, *Weeds: An Environmental History of Metropolitan America* (Pittsburgh: The University of Pittsburgh Press, 2010). Richard Mabey, *Weeds: How vagabond plants gatecrashed civilisation and changed the way we think about nature* (London: Profile Books Ltd, 2010). Nina Edwards, *Weeds* (London: Reaktion Books Ltd, 2015).

⁴⁴ Jones, *Just Weeds*, xiii.

perpetuate notions of classism and prejudice.⁴⁵ This sort of landscape performativity can be explicitly witnessed in the infamous phenomenon of the American Lawn.

The soft, blanket green ground covering we are accustomed to was first introduced by Americans after the Civil War. It is important to note, that during this time, similar lawns were featured in the Victorian (1837-1901) and Edwardian (1901-1910) gardens of Britain;⁴⁶ however, the American Lawn covered a much larger surface area and such lawns were often described as velvety, carpet-like, and even compared with “fatless” human bodies on account of their trim expanses.⁴⁷ The American Lawn boggled the minds of visitors. Even up to the mid 20th century, visitors to the United States considered the consistent presence of manicured lawns to be novel and uncanny.⁴⁸ Many texts that reference the phenomenon of the American Lawn refer to an ideal lawn to be free from weeds or animal presence.⁴⁹ When life and culture settled and strengthened after the devastations of WWII, the focus on lawn maintenance intensified.⁵⁰ The lawn, and in turn, nature, was recognized as one thing we could control in an era where everything appeared uncertain and unsafe.⁵¹ As Edwards maintains, there is an innate association between weeds and political objection – a weedy garden, for example, inherently suggests abandonment, non-conformity, and unruliness.⁵²

My aim in this chapter is certainly not to ignore some of the plants that are considered invasive and dangerous; in fact, one of the ways in which I argue for the ecological significance

⁴⁵ James S. Duncan and Nancy G. Duncan, *Landscapes of Privilege: The Politics of the Aesthetic in an American Suburb* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 37.

⁴⁶ Edwards, *Weeds*, 55.

⁴⁷ Georges Teyssot, *The American Lawn* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1999), 1-2.

⁴⁸ Virginia Scott Jenkins, *The Lawn: A History of an American Obsession* (Baltimore: Smithsonian Institution, 1994), 2-3.

⁴⁹ Georges Teyssot, *The American Lawn* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1999). Virginia Scott Jenkins, *The Lawn: A History of an American Obsession* (Baltimore: Smithsonian Institution, 1994).

⁵⁰ Jenkins, *The Lawn*, 93.

⁵¹ Teyssot, *The American Lawn*, 2.

⁵² Edwards, *Weeds*, 51.

of weeds *is in their capacity to be* ruthless and dynamic. A large percentage of invasive species we encounter today have been introduced from other parts of the world; for example, 40% of the total flora in the British Isles are foreign species.⁵³ While plants and seedlings can accidentally travel abroad along with shipments or human companions, many plants travel for the purpose of enhancing garden aesthetics. When plants travel thousands of miles away from their native ecosystems that keep them naturally controlled, they can become invasive and even dangerous.⁵⁴ For example, the Japanese knotweed, an elegant shrub adorned with rounded leaves and pale green feathery blossoms, was introduced to Britain as an addition to woodland gardens.⁵⁵ It has since *become* a weed as it can spread easily through extensive root systems, human activity, and through perpetuating soil erosion.⁵⁶ The plant's introduction has become a costly endeavor as the removal of the Japanese knotweed at East London's Olympic site has cost England roughly £70 million.⁵⁷ In other words, there are many weeds that were once considered plants until the very moment they become a burden for the human, and this is the kind of treatment my thesis argues against. The dynamism and ruthlessness of unplanted species is what makes them ecologically significant, contributing to the livability of our planet.

1.4: Reconsidering the Precarious Weed

While weeds can interfere with the light, water, and nutrients of other plants such as crops or native species,⁵⁸ and can sometimes become a sort of alien superpowers⁵⁹ that invades our gardens with their long green arms and strong twisted roots, there are many reasons to

⁵³ Edwards, *Weeds*, 20.

⁵⁴ Mabey, *Weeds*, 5.

⁵⁵ Mabey, *Weeds*, 4.

⁵⁶ "Knotweeds," Invasive Species Council of BC, accessed on January 16, 2020, <https://bcinvasives.ca/invasive-species/identify/invasive-plants/knotweed>.

⁵⁷ Mabey, *Weeds*, 5.

⁵⁸ Edwards, *Weeds*, 23.

⁵⁹ Mabey, *Weeds*, 14.

believe that we should reconsider the weed. Like other plants, weeds support ecosystems by hosting and providing pollen for many beneficial insects in addition to providing food and shelter to wildlife.⁶⁰ I witnessed this firsthand at the empty lot where Dadson chose to enact his painted weeds this past summer (fig. 6). When moving around the lot, I found myself hyper-aware of the bees and pollinating insects buzzing around the weeds growing within this space. Pollinators are essential in ensuring we have the produce we need to survive and the most significant threat that pollinators face today is loss of habitat.⁶¹ Herbicides used to eradicate weeds are an additional culprit that threaten pollinators because they depend on weeds to survive.⁶² In short, weeds are fundamental to the existence of pollinators and in turn, the absence of weeds can affect our own sources of food. Not only that, some plants branded as weeds can support the growth and the potential of other plants, and the removal of one weed may encourage more noxious plants to prosper.⁶³ It is in these ways that we can understand that diverse ecosystems that include weeds are important in the sustainability and health of the environment at large.

Global warming and climate change are both contributing to increases in weed growth and this will require our adaptation and general acceptance of weeds. Because weeds thrive in warmer, damper climates, global warming has and will increase the presence and alleged threat of weeds.⁶⁴ Additionally, as animal and plant species decrease due to human or climate-induced extinction, we may be approaching a “world with only couch grass, dandelions, ground elder, with rats, cockroaches, pigeons... and with humans just about clinging on.”⁶⁵ While urban pests

⁶⁰ Mabey, *Weeds*, 23.

⁶¹ “Bees and Other Pollinators,” *Canadian Wildlife Federation*, accessed on January 12, 2020, http://cwfcfcf.org/en/resources/encyclopedias/fauna/insects/bees-and-other-pollinators.html?gclid=CjwKCAiA66_xBRBhEiwAhrMuLXoZsbDLE2sbfjEOVQ5xt3w4cVgwF1-D6TJQg-rjIY7uK7TJ1pjyQBoCR6kQAvD_BwE.

⁶² “Bees and Other Pollinators,” *Canadian Wildlife Federation*.

⁶³ Mabey, *Weeds*, 36.

⁶⁴ Edwards, *Weeds*, 35.

⁶⁵ Edwards, *Weeds*, 203.

can be understood to represent decay and contamination, they can also symbolize our inability to control and contain nature.⁶⁶ We can also look to weeds in that same way. Like sudden floods and earthquakes suggest more dramatically, weeds can show us that despite our efforts to contain nature, it will always surpass us and challenge what we have built.⁶⁷

The presence of weeds proceeding human-induced tragedy (e.g. the environmental crises, wars and bombing) can be a meaningful place to reconsider the weed. In fact, weeds seem to thrive alongside human beings; while they are not akin to parasites that rely on us to survive, as Mabey suggests, we are weeds' "natural ecological partners, the species alongside which they do best."⁶⁸ They actually *thrive* in arable fields, battlefields, parking lots, roadsides, and along borders and fences. Two notable examples raised by Edwards of where weeds have thrived directly within warzones occurred after World War I and II. The first example is the infamous Flanders Fields. The wild corn poppy is considered a weed and it was within the muddy trenches that the poppy was particularly successful; as a result, the poppy became a symbol of survival and the beauty of resilience.⁶⁹ A second example is within the bombsites of London after WWII, where a plant called rosebay willowherb (also known as fireweed) carpeted the sites of destruction in pink-purple blossoms and created whole new ecosystems.⁷⁰ Incidentally, Londoners responded by referring to the plant as 'bombweed.'⁷¹ Because the poppy and the rosebay willowherb are vibrant and flowering plants, it comes as no surprise that their existence as weeds was accepted and praised; however, what is most pertinent in these cases is the way in

⁶⁶ Mark Dion and Alexis Rockman, *Concrete Jungle: A Pop Media Investigation of Death and Survival in Urban Ecosystems* (New York: Juno Books, 1996, 8.

⁶⁷ Edwards, *Weeds*, 24.

⁶⁸ Mabey, *Weeds*, 12.

⁶⁹ Edwards, *Weeds*, 51.

⁷⁰ Edwards, *Weeds*, 23.

⁷¹ Edwards, *Weeds*, 23.

which weeds appear as a metaphor for man's failure⁷² as "they green over the dereliction we have created."⁷³

Anthropologist Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing takes these ideas further when she writes in length about another important weed, the Matsutake mushroom. In the wake of the deforestation of Oregon's Ponderosa pines, Tsing turns to the Matsutake who has taken up residence within this destruction as an emblem of promise and ruin. While Tsing is specie-specific and focuses her attention on the Matsutake and its particular contributions – such as the ways they thrive within dereliction while supporting new forest growth – her notion of *precarity* is productive when reconsidering weeds in general. Precarity, she states *is* the condition of our time, rather than the exception, and suggests asking the question: "What if precarity, indeterminacy, and what we imagine as trivial are the center of the systematicity we seek?"⁷⁴ Here, she reflects upon the environmental crisis, attributing the cause to the steady rise of capitalism, and how we will continue to experience the effects of the environmental crisis with increasing severity. She compares the notion of precarity with vulnerability and points to our *lack* of control within the "stable structure of community."⁷⁵ We can use this notion when considering weeds as they exist in tandem with some of the structures that attempt to control nature such as city bylaws and the defining qualities of the American Lawn. While we attempt to fit nature within borders, fences, and conceptual frameworks, they threaten our attempts and push through anyway; weeds significantly enforce this because they have the capacity to thrive within inhospitable environments. Weeds are unpredictable, historically condemned, and considered immoral.

⁷² Edwards, *Weeds*, 42.

⁷³ Mabey, *Weeds*, 20.

⁷⁴ Anna Tsing, *Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 20.

⁷⁵ Anna Tsing, *Mushroom at the End of the World*, 20.

Accepting weeds can be a precarious task for humans. Tsing posits that although indeterminacy is a frightening concept to embrace, now is the time to welcome precarity as a site that “makes life possible.”⁷⁶ Precarity is the daughter of global warming and climate change and it reminds us that adaptation and transformation equates to survival.⁷⁷

Tsing’s emphasis on living in a state of precarity is echoed in multispecies feminist theorist Donna J. Haraway’s concept of *tentacular thinking*, which is a productive way to consider and merge with entities that we traditionally feel threatened or disgusted by. Haraway invents the term ‘Chthulucene’ as a third more lucrative option to describe our current geological age (rather than the Anthropocene or the Capitalocene) and offers it as a mode through which we can learn “to stay with the trouble of living and dying in response-ability on a damaged earth.”⁷⁸ The term ‘chthonic’ stems from the Greek word for ‘earth’ that is commonly used in mythology to describe entities who reside beneath the earth and within the underworld and who have been condemned by society.⁷⁹ For Haraway, ‘chthonic ones’ refer to monsters possessing “tentacles, feelers, digits, cords, whiptails, spider legs, and very unruly hair,” and that these creatures (plural) should replace monotheistic systems where there is one god or one predominant authority figure.⁸⁰ I posit that weeds equally perform as monsters as they too, are condemned from society. Tentacular thinking is a framework to think through the Chthulucene where tentacles (or creepy, twisting stems) are simultaneously open and embracing in addition to being detached and knotted.⁸¹ While it is challenging to imagine what a Chthulucene era could actually

⁷⁶ Anna Tsing, *Mushroom at the End of the World*, 20.

⁷⁷ Anna Tsing, *Mushroom at the End of the World*, 27.

⁷⁸ Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 2.

⁷⁹ “Chthonic,” Merriam Webster, accessed March 15, 2019, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/chthonic>.

⁸⁰ Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 2.

⁸¹ Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 34.

involve, and Haraway is somewhat vague in her explanation of these concepts, what is important is the proposition to decenter the human and to consider beings that are traditionally condemned.

1.5: Turning to a Plant's View

Giovanni Aloï, a scholar whose research interests include both contemporary art and plants, begins his book *Botanical Speculations* by asking the important question: “how can we set up a thinking space in which we can conceive plants and be with plants without inexorably falling into the classical anthropomorphic tropes of the past?”⁸² This question is valuable because as I have attempted to demonstrate, weeds are actually conceived through human’s desire to control and categorize nature. So, to consider the importance of weeds is to learn to understand them and not exclusively from a humanistic perspective that looks to the benefit of weeds, but instead from a plant’s perspective. While Aloï’s book, a collection of essays and artist interviews, does not resolve his query, I turn to three authors of plant agency who consider plant intelligence and plant-time to stress the importance of plants generally.

Postmodern literary critic N. Katherine Hayles speaks to the cognitive capacities of plants in her book *Unthought: The Power of the Cognitive Nonconscious* (2017). She challenges the common belief that human consciousness greatly exceeds the agency and capacities of nonconsciousness. Rather than consciousness which occupies the central position in our thinking (e.g. how we make sense of our lives), cognition extends beyond consciousness into other neurological processes which Hayles calls “nonconscious cognition.”⁸³ It is not within the realm of consciousness but rather nonconscious cognition where highly complex interior and exterior

⁸² Giovanni Aloï, *Botanical Speculations: Plants in Contemporary Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2018), xxxiii.

⁸³ N. Katherine Hayles, *Unthought: The Power of the Cognitive Unconscious*, (London: The University of Chicago Press, 2017), 9.

information is processed.⁸⁴ Cognition, she states, exists in all biological life forms including “those lacking central nervous systems such as plants and microorganisms.”⁸⁵ Her argument departs from some of the writing emerging out of the mid 20th century and beyond that fictitiously associated plants with humanlike emotions.⁸⁶ Instead, she posits that plant cognition is significantly complex; plants “sense information from their surroundings, communicate within themselves and other biota, and respond flexibly and adapt to their changing environments.”⁸⁷ Plants also emit and sense electrical and chemical signals as they interpret and adapt to changing environments.⁸⁸ Hayles’ interest in nonconscious cognition does not altogether disregard the achievements produced by conscious thinking but rather she aims to overcome an anthropocentric view of cognition more broadly and to consider other cognizers on our planet.⁸⁹

Philosopher Michael Marder takes a phenomenological approach and reinforces the notion that plants are capable beings, but in a way that partly excludes the human. To be capable of something, he affirms, is to actively “strive toward that of which one is capable[...] with one’s whole being.”⁹⁰ As Hayles would also attest, Marder states that the intentionality of plants is nonconscious. This sentiment stems from the Aristotelian scheme that compares vegetable existence with undisturbed slumber.⁹¹ Yet Marder pushes this notion and states that plants actually possess a desire that surpasses the aim to passively seek nourishment.⁹² He suggests,

⁸⁴ Hayles, *Unthought*, 10.

⁸⁵ Hayles, *Unthought*, 15.

⁸⁶ Hayles, *Unthought*, 17. Hayles is referring to Peter Tompkins and Christopher Bird’s controversial pop science book *The Secret Life of Plants* from 1973. Since that publication, many plant scientists have strayed from the topic of “plant intelligence” in order to avoid potential backlash.

⁸⁷ Hayles, *Unthought*, 20.

⁸⁸ Hayles, *Unthought*, 20.

⁸⁹ Hayles, *Unthought*, 11.

⁹⁰ Michael Marder, *Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 37.

⁹¹ Marder, *Plant-Thinking*, 37. The direct quote from Aristotle states that there is no “difference between slumbering without being awakened from the first day till the last of a thousand or any number of years, and living a vegetable existence” (*Eudemian Ethics*).

⁹² Marder, *Plant-Thinking*, 40.

instead, that the plant possesses a vegetal soul and it is within the *dunamis*⁹³ (the Aristotlian notion for “what is” or for “what has certain potency”) of that soul where the capacity for growth, for decay, but also for the assimilation of nutrients, originates; plants seem to limitlessly expand in every direction and not simply toward the sun which is emblematic of their desire to reach and extend beyond their basic needs.⁹⁴ This enactment of “spatial becoming” is the result of plants exercising the capacities of their soul. From these notions we can further speculate that weeds possess a highly invigorated vegetal soul, one that allows the plant to reach and surpass its own potential.

Marder and author/activist Michael Pollan both speak to the incongruency of plant and human worlds. Marder states that the world(s) that plants access, influence, and are influenced by, “[do] not overlap the human *lebenswelt* [life-world]” but instead, relate to the vegetal modes of dwelling.⁹⁵ Marder agrees with Heidegger’s argument that plants (and other nonhuman entities) do not *have* a world, but rather two or more worlds (and temporalities).⁹⁶ He insists on the need to maintain plants’ otherness. This notion may seem to oppose Haraway’s *tentacular thinking*; however, both approaches can be embraced simultaneously. Marder is not advocating that we should not merge with plants, but rather that we should respect the ways in which they assume a hetero-temporality that is nonsynchronous with our perception of time.⁹⁷ Pollan reaffirms this idea after he was intimately acquainted with the dynamics of gardening in spaces exceeding city limits. After many trials and tribulations between him a woodchuck who had a taste for garden vegetables, Pollan realized that “the forest is ‘normal,’ everything else – the

⁹³ *Dunamis* is the philosophical concept of potentiality and actuality.

⁹⁴ Marder, *Plant-Thinking*, 37.

⁹⁵ Marder, *Plant-Thinking*, 8.

⁹⁶ Marder, *Plant-Thinking*, 8.

⁹⁷ Marder, *Plant-Thinking*, 12.

fields and meadows, the lawns and pavements, and, most spectacularly, the gardens – is an ecological ‘vacuum’ that nature will not abide for long.”⁹⁸ In essence, his article reveals that human time and ecological time are disharmonious and that while the activities of humans often seek to control ecological time, nature “deploys her various agents to undo our work in the garden.”⁹⁹

Hayles, Marder, and Pollan look at plants as different from the human, but absolutely not inferior to humans. Hayles speaks to the nonconscious cognitive abilities of plants, Marder looks at the multiple temporalities in which plants exist and how they possess a drive that exceeds basic needs, and lastly, Pollan speaks to the disharmonious nature of plant time which opposes the human desire to control and maintain natural environments. These thinkers are key to what this chapter has attempted to prove: weeds are indispensable, not simply as plants, but as important contributors to the very livability of our environment. As I have demonstrated, weeds are a social and linguistic construct developed out of humans’ desire to control nature. Weeds are the plants that particularly disobey both the physical and the tangible boundaries established by the human. They thrive in human-induced destruction and with the onset of global warming and climate change, weeds will be present in increasing numbers. There is a pertinence, then, in understanding their existence by decentering the human.

⁹⁸ Michael Pollan, “Gardening Means War,” *The New York Times Magazine*, June 19, 1988, <https://michaelpollan.com/articles-archive/gardening-means-war/>.

⁹⁹ Pollan, “Gardening Means War.”

CHAPTER 2: A QUASI-RECORD OF WEEDS

2.1: Introduction

Chapter two aims to describe the ways Dadson presents, what I refer to as, a “quasi-record” of weeds. I begin by introducing the influential “Vancouver School” (of Photoconceptualism) to which Dadson has been exposed from the start of his artistic training and career, a group of artists that emerged at the beginning in the late 1960s and who were recognized for integrating some of the main propositions of the conceptual art movement, while at the same time, challenging the movement by utilizing the mediums and practices of photography and cinematography. Predominantly, I look at the progression of Jeff Wall’s artistic practice to reveal his strategy of “near-documentary” – a hybrid of reportage and artifice. This strategy helps define Dadson’s series as a “quasi-record” of weeds as it, too, fuses modes of documentation and artifice. I then discuss the documentary aspects of Dadson’s series; in this case, his exploration of Carolus Linnaeus’s binomial system of taxonomic nomenclature in lieu of titling to establish the names of each plant within the frame. Next, I look at historian of science Lorraine Daston and philosopher of science Peter Galison’s book *Objectivity* (2007) to outline some of the developments in the history of scientific image-making to point out the unattainability of “pure objectivity” and the way that “scientific objectivity” is always a negotiation between self and other. Finally, I reveal Dadson’s modes of integrating elements of artifice into the creation of his series through the artistic strategy I call “gentle intervention.” Here, I compare Dadson’s modality within the tradition set up by British land artists Richard Long and Andy Goldsworthy whose gentle land gestures make visible what is already present in nature. Ultimately, chapter two investigates Dadson’s “quasi-record” as a redistribution of the

sensible – a countervisuality that discloses weeds as pertinent contributors to the sustainability of our planet.

2.2: Defining the Quasi: The Vancouver School and Jeff Wall

Photoconceptualism in Vancouver

Despite witnessing an influx of artists and critics in the 1960s and 1970s, it was not until the mid-late-1980s that the city of Vancouver was first recognized as a significant fulcrum in contemporary art with the emergence of a group of artists commonly referred to as the Vancouver School (of Photoconceptualism).¹⁰⁰ The artists that co-created this group seem to always include Jeff Wall (b. 1946) and Ian Wallace (b. 1943); however, other artists that are frequently associated include: Roy Arden, Ken Lum, Rodney Graham, Christos Dikeakos, Arni Haraldsson, and Stan Douglas.¹⁰¹ The artists of the Vancouver School were bound through a variety of common – and seemingly trivial – interests including having affiliations with pop groups and “a certain disdain for [west coast] hippie ethic and aesthetic”; however, more consequentially, the artists united through a mutual interest in rigorous academic training and discourse, in addition to their common drive to reclaim and reinvent certain aspects of the pictorialist tradition.¹⁰² The Vancouver School’s elevated status only came to fruition after several decades of exploring varying and evolving modes of what is referred to as *post-conceptual* photography, or more commonly: *photoconceptualism*. In his 1988 essay,

¹⁰⁰ Scott Watson and Dieter Roelstraete, et al., *Intertidal: Vancouver Art and Artists* (Vancouver: Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, 2006), 11. European curators Bart de Baere and Dieter Roelstraete refer to the term “Vancouver School” as something that was originally used in “jest” but that it was understood (by the artists) to be “reductive” and not widely utilized. According to visual studies scholar Leah Modigliani, the artists were united through their academic ‘school’ affiliations including Simon Fraser University (Jeff Wall taught Rodney Graham), the University of British Columbia (Ian Wallace taught Jeff Wall and Rodney Graham), Emily Carr University of Art + Design (Ian Wallace taught Stan Douglas, Roy Arden, and hired Jeff Wall). Leah Modigliani, *Engendering an Avant-garde: The Unsettled Landscapes of Vancouver Photoconceptualism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018), 2.

¹⁰¹ Watson and Roelstraete, *Intertidal*, 11. Modigliani, *Engendering an Avant-garde*, 2.

¹⁰² Watson and Roelstraete, *Intertidal*, 11.

“Photoconceptual Art in Vancouver,” Ian Wallace defines photoconceptualism to “not necessarily refer to photography that has a conceptual intention, but rather to photographic work that originated in conceptual art and the late-modernist tendencies most closely associated with it.”¹⁰³ Out of the conceptual art of the 1960s and 1970s, photoconceptualism perpetuated similar “core propositions” including: valuing concept and subject matter over medium; rooting its cause in language, behaviour, politics, and media pluralities; resituating traditional genres and institutions; and supporting such claims through the dissemination of critical discourse.¹⁰⁴

Since its initial conception in the late 1960s by Jeff Wall and Ian Wallace, photoconceptualism in Vancouver developed out of several key initiatives: to refuse the “idealized local landscape” of the city in favour for an image reflecting Vancouver as a centre of industry, to adopt photography and cinematography into conceptual art practices, and to endorse critical discourse about both local and international history.¹⁰⁵ An example of this earlier period of photoconceptualism is Wall’s 1969 publication, *Landscape Manual* (fig. 7), which consisted of a collection of photographs shot through the window of a car revealing the Vancouver suburban landscape.¹⁰⁶ First introduced by writer Dennis Wheeler in 1970, the term “defeatured landscapes” was used to describe works like *Landscape Manual* likely as a nod to Robert Smithson’s writing on New Jersey’s suburban developments.¹⁰⁷ Wallace suggests that the difference between the work of Smithson and Dan Graham whose industrial and suburban landscapes mirrored the “emptiness of the minimalist aesthetic,” Wall’s *Landscape Manual* was seen to introduce political implications in its “apparently objective accounting of the

¹⁰³ Ian Wallace, “Photoconceptual Art in Vancouver,” in *Thirteen Essays on Photography* (Ottawa: Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography, 1990), 94.

¹⁰⁴ Wallace, “Photoconceptual Art in Vancouver,” 95.

¹⁰⁵ Modigliani, *Engendering an Avant-garde*, 3.

¹⁰⁶ Wallace, “Photoconceptual Art in Vancouver,” 97.

¹⁰⁷ Modigliani, *Engendering an Avant-garde*, 5.

environment.”¹⁰⁸ Curator Scott Watson suggests that for Wall, in addition to Wallace and artist Iain Baxter, producing images of the city became “the means to visualize the abstractions of capitalism that were transforming [Vancouver]” especially in the 1960s.¹⁰⁹ For Wall, this meant using techniques of documentation similarly to artists like Smithson, Ed Ruscha, and William Burroughs.¹¹⁰ For Wallace, Wall’s strategy of creating a photographic document was not simply an “objective mirroring of reality” but a reflection of self-consciousness, somewhere between the everyday experience and the “conventionalized codes and typologies offered by the aesthetics of minimalism.”¹¹¹

The 1970s brought a “second phase” to Vancouver photoconceptualism which was the “impulse toward narrativity and performance” through film, video, and text-oriented work, eventually leading the artists to make large-scale pictorial installations using video and photography.¹¹² As opposed to the minimalist and “reductivist aesthetics which characterized the earlier phase of photoconceptualism,” Wallace suggests that what was created was a productive – and post-modernist – fusion between the critical theory so significant in conceptual art and a new emphasis on both performance and process.¹¹³ One of the most pivotal developments in Vancouver photoconceptualism in the mid-late 1970s that contributed to this new performative aspect, was the use of Cibachrome (now called Ilfochrome) – a unique photographic process where images are printed on a polyester-based paper coated with 13 layers of colour azo dyes which enables greater “physical depth and dimension.”¹¹⁴ While artist Iain Baxter pioneered

¹⁰⁸ Wallace, “Photoconceptual Art in Vancouver,” 97.

¹⁰⁹ Watson and Roelstraete, *Intertidal*, 35.

¹¹⁰ Watson and Roelstraete, *Intertidal*, 35.

¹¹¹ Wallace, “Photoconceptual Art in Vancouver,” 98.

¹¹² Wallace, “Photoconceptual Art in Vancouver,” 98.

¹¹³ Wallace, “Photoconceptual Art in Vancouver,” 100.

¹¹⁴ Douglas Vincent, “Ilfochrome,” Douglas Vincent: Photographic Arts, accessed June 1, 2020, <https://douglasvincent.com/ilfochrome/>.

back-lit Cibachrome in Vancouver and began to construct lightboxes with the material between 1967-1968, it wasn't until the late 1970s that artists like Wall utilized lightboxes to make large-scale, illuminated photographic works.¹¹⁵ Wall claims it was the bus ride between Spain and England in 1977 where he witnessed several back-lit signs at bus terminals that persuaded him to monumentalize photography, connecting “elements of scale and the body that were important to Judd and Newman and Pollock, as well as Velásquez, Goya, Titian, or Manet.”¹¹⁶ It was on that same trip to Europe that Wall saw an “urgent relevance to the making of art” in paintings like Diego Velásquez's 1656 *Las Meninas* with its confronting scale, its “complex spatial arrangement” forcing the body to mobilize around the painting, and its obscure “illusion of reality” that lead him to consider the potential of performativity in photoconceptualism. At the same time that Wall strove to make work that paralleled the great master artists he mentioned, the mid-1970s brought poignant shifts in the commercial art market where photoconceptualism was recognized as a significant artform, rather than simply occupying the margins of conceptual art.¹¹⁷ In other words, there were several contributing factors leading to Wall's decision to, as I mentioned before, “monumentalize photography” and depart from some previous, more modest traditions of the medium.

The following year, Wall created his first large-scale, back-lit Cibachrome work called *The Destroyed Room* (159cm x 229cm) (fig. 8) explicably inspired by Eugène Delacroix's 1827 painting, *The Death of Sardanapalus* (fig. 9). While Delacroix envisioned in his canvas the final moments for the Assyrian King as he voyeuristically observed the destruction of his palace, *The Destroyed Room* presents a similar violent wreckage in the piles of discarded clothing and

¹¹⁵ Watson and Roelstraete, *Intertidal*, 36.

¹¹⁶ Sheena Wagstaff, *Jeff Wall Photographs 1978-2004* (London: Tate Publishing, 2005), 7.

¹¹⁷ Wallace, “Photoconceptual Art in Vancouver,” 101.

accessories, slashed mattress, and gouged walls. Art historian Sheena Wagstaff observes some blatant compositional similarities between the works, namely Delacroix's extreme diagonal line joining the upper left and lower right sides of the canvas analogously to the way Wall's slashed mattress forms an identical diagonal line.¹¹⁸ Adding to the dramatic narrativity of the photograph, Wall mounted the Cibachrome transparency onto an aluminum case backlit by fluorescent tubes; for Wall, the lightbox had become an object akin to the work of minimalist sculptors such as Donald Judd or Carl Andre in that it coerced a relationship between object and viewer.¹¹⁹ Instead of acknowledging the lightbox solely as a "discrete object," Wagstaff argues that the "optical radiance" afforded by the lightbox functions to punctuate the colours and textures of the wreckage making it what she refers to as a "ravishing illuminated spectacle."¹²⁰ It is with these initial experiments with documentation as we saw in *Landscape Manual* from 1969 and what Wall later calls "blatant artifice" in *The Destroyed Room* from 1978 that we can observe the beginnings of a sort of fusion, an artistic strategy Wall refers to as: near-documentary.

Jeff Wall's Near-Documentary

Following some of the artists exploring street photography at the time, such as Robert Frank, Wall challenged the notion of this "documentary tradition" of capturing the live action of urban life through a mode he refers to as "cinematography" – a *staged* photograph.¹²¹ For Wall, the decision to implement artifice or modes of theatricality into the composition of his

¹¹⁸ Wagstaff, *Jeff Wall Photographs*, 8. Wagstaff mentions that it "has been noted elsewhere" Wall had lectured on Delacroix. Around this time, Wall taught art history and studio art at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design (1974-1975), Simon Fraser University (1976-1987), the University of British Columbia, and the European Graduate School.

¹¹⁹ Wagstaff, *Jeff Wall Photographs*, 8.

¹²⁰ Wagstaff, *Jeff Wall Photographs*, 8.

¹²¹ Wagstaff, *Jeff Wall Photographs*, 11.

photographs was, in itself, “compatible with the ‘documentary style’ of street photography.”¹²² He got the idea for his 1982 work, *Mimic* (fig. 10) after witnessing a racist gesture in the streets of Vancouver; he later recreated the scene using a similar set of techniques that are commonly employed in neo-documentary filmmaking including the utilization of non-professional actors and the application of extensive lighting schemes to evoke natural light.¹²³ As a result, Wall’s cinematography is a hybrid between the frozen-in-action theatricality of history paintings with a “more fluent neo-realist treatment of those images, as if they were projected in the cinema.”¹²⁴ In particular, Wagstaff compares Wall’s cinematography to the haphazard and almost spectral qualities of neo-realist cinema from the 1970s such as the films by Robert Rossellini and Vittorio de Sica.¹²⁵ In other words, it is *through* the “performance and narrative potential of both cinema and painting” that Wall can create a convincing (almost documentary) portrayal of an actual event; and yet, it is with its technical artifices – its large scale and its lightbox – that the viewer is able to experience a “real-life intimacy with the characters in the picture.”¹²⁶ This intimate position of the viewer is, in itself, another example of how *Mimic* rests between documentary and artifice because, as American literary theorist Walter Benn Michaels argues, “the primary effect of the closeness of life-size figures to the surface in [*Mimic*] is to push the photographer out of the space of the representation” thus negating the possibility of the photograph capturing an authentic, real-life action.¹²⁷

More recently, Wall has begun to refer to the liminal quality of his approach to photoconceptualism and cinematography as *near-documentary*, “signaling the inescapable

¹²² Wagstaff, *Jeff Wall Photographs*, 11.

¹²³ Wagstaff, *Jeff Wall Photographs*, 11.

¹²⁴ Wagstaff, *Jeff Wall Photographs*, 11.

¹²⁵ Wagstaff, *Jeff Wall Photographs*, 11.

¹²⁶ Wagstaff, *Jeff Wall Photographs*, 12.

¹²⁷ Walter Benn Michaels, “The Politics of a Good Picture: Race, Class, and Form in Jeff Wall’s *Mimic*,” *PMLA* 125, no. 1 (Jan 2010): 180.

relation between photography and the documentary form.”¹²⁸ In a 2012 interview with critical and cultural studies scholar Magnolia Pauker, Wall states that because photography as a medium is so inescapably grounded in reportage, he can only “develop a *relation* with documentary” [emphasis added].¹²⁹ Art historian Wolfgang Brückle productively compares Wall’s documentary approach with the work of American photographer Walker Evans to further comprehend how Wall can freely refer to his work using a term that is so tied to an actual “visual genre with specific characteristics, including the implication that the photographer is operating in a non-artistic way.”¹³⁰ Instead of using the term “documentary” to signal a genre, Brückle states that Wall utilizes the term from the perspective of his own relationship to his medium as a “matter of style.”¹³¹ Adding the word “near,” then, acts as a mode to reinvent traditional realism without sacrificing its sentiment as a strategy of reportage. To summarize, while the term “documentary” can suggest both a visual genre and an objective perspective, Wall uses the term to reference his own artistic strategy – or artistic style – of using techniques of reportage to capture staged tableaux vivant based on real events.

My aim in this section was to trace a short history of photoconceptualism in Vancouver to outline the evolving modes of experimentation that eventually lead Jeff Wall to create his monumental fusions of reportage and artifice – what he refers to as near-documentary. I have referred to Dadson’s series as presenting a “quasi-record” of weeds as his work, too, produces a liminality – for him, between documentation and gentle intervention. It is without question that Dadson is influenced by the Vancouver School. While their paths did not directly cross, Dadson

¹²⁸ Jeff Wall, “Unsettled Method: The Cinematic Pictures of Jeff Wall,” interview by Magnolia Pauker, *Art and Australia* 49, no. 4 (Summer 2012): 656.

¹²⁹ Jeff Wall, “Unsettled Method,” 663.

¹³⁰ Wolfgang Brückle, “Almost Merovingian: On Jeff Wall’s Relation to Nearly Everything,” *Art History* 32, no. 1 (2009): 981.

¹³¹ Brückle, “Almost Merovingian,” 981.

attend the very university (ECUAD) where Ian Wallace taught, and Roy Arden and Stan Douglas attended.¹³² Additionally, Dadson has a connection with Jeff Wall. Between 2005 and 2010, Dadson moved into a house and working space that neighboured Wall's studio. In my introduction I referred to an earlier work of Dadson's called *Black Yard* from 2007, which features the back of Wall's actual studio that Dadson painted black and photographed (without permission). The artists may not have a strong personal connection and Dadson may not have been directly influenced by Wall's work, however, it is clear that there is an established relationship between the artists and the larger Vancouver community, and that cannot be ignored. More importantly, Jeff Wall's photographic work was internationally known when Dadson received his training and began his artistic production. What Dadson is exploring from the traditions of Vancouver photoconceptualism is the renewal of the notions of documentation and *objectivity*.

2.3: Linnaean Systematics and the Objective

When considering the notion of the 'right' in the claim for the right to look, Mirzoeff states that like visibility, countervisuality also "interfaces 'formal' and 'historical' aspects."¹³³ Dadson employs a traditional mode of categorizing plants using a binomial system of taxonomic nomenclature, in lieu of abstract or symbolic titling, to address the specific plants he centralizes within the frame. It is in this way that his series acts as a process of redistributing the sensible: he adopts traditional classification systematics while disrupting that 'tradition' by using a strategy I call "gentle intervention" (see section 2.4). The particular binomial system Dadson implements was originally developed in the early 18th century by Carl Linnaeus (Carl von Linné in Swedish; Carolus Linnaeus in Latin [1707-1778]). In 1735, Linnaeus published his book *Systema Naturae*

¹³² Modigliani, *Engendering an Avant-garde*, 5.

¹³³ Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look*, 24.

of animals, plants, and minerals, each given a unique name composed of two Latin words: the first word refers to the species' *genus* and the second word provides a distinguishing feature individual to that species.¹³⁴ For example, Dadson's title for one of the two works I examine in this thesis (fig. 1) is: *Black Medic and Foxtail Barley (Medicago lupulina and Hordeum jubatum) Pink*; the first terms "Black Medic" and "Foxtail Barley" refer to their common names in North America, whereas the terms in parentheses "Medicago lupulina" and "Hordeum jubatum" refer to their Latin names as per the Linnaean system.

By the tenth edition of Linnaeus's *System Naturae* (1758-1759), it had become the primary classification system and by the early 19th century, it was the "only system" worthy of being taught to young European naturalists.¹³⁵ By the time the Linnaean system had become the dominating system of classification, its ubiquity had almost eradicated all other forms of natural history systematics; while Linnaeus had greatly contributed to the widespread proliferation of nature more broadly, he had also participated in the creation of a system that reduced the "intricate details and organic connections" intrinsic to the natural world to "a cataloging of additional data points."¹³⁶ Religion scholar Samuel J. Kessler references Michel Foucault's interpretation of the Linnaean system as one that "takes from nature precisely the tension between being and becoming, between chaos and order, between individuality and assemblage," a system entraps us, and nature itself, into a "grid of denominations."¹³⁷ Kessler states that the "grid" (using Foucault's terminology) *creates* nature at the same time as categorizing it and the Linnaean system does not destroy nature in its process but rather, it "shields us from seeing

¹³⁴ Kessler, "Systematization," 439.

¹³⁵ Kessler, "Systematization," 439.

¹³⁶ Kessler, "Systematization," 440.

¹³⁷ Kessler, "Systematization," 440.

something else.”¹³⁸ In short, Dadson’s utilization of the Linnaean system in his titling addresses traditional systems of categorization: it acknowledges their reductive disposition while also using them to bring weeds *into* a renewed reality and legitimacy. As Mirzoeff states, countervisualities are strategies that claim the “right to existence.”¹³⁹

Objectivity: A New Way of Studying Nature

As modes of reportage, and the genre of documentary photography more broadly, strive to provide an objective perspective, in their book *Objectivity* (2007), Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison trace a history of scientific objectivity to argue that the goal to “aspire to knowledge that bears no trace of the knower – knowledge unmarked by prejudice or skill, fantasy or judgment, wishing or striving” has developed out of complicated history.¹⁴⁰ The authors have chosen to tell this story through the tradition of making scientific atlases (from mainly the 19th and 20th centuries) to outline three main “epistemic virtues” leading to what we know today as scientific objectivity, including: truth-to-nature, mechanical objectivity, and trained judgment.¹⁴¹ What they have discovered in tracing this history, is that each of the three virtues arrived successively as a reaction to, or building upon, the previous mode; where truth-to-nature was a “precondition” to mechanical objectivity and where mechanical objectivity eventually lead to trained judgment – I will expand upon these concepts later.¹⁴² The three main epistemic virtues of scientific objectivity were utilized to build scientific atlases, or in other words, “systematic compilations of working objects”¹⁴³ -- working objects refer to atlas images, type specimens, or laboratory processes, carefully selected to provide “initiates and neophytes alike” with exemplary models of

¹³⁸ Kessler, “Systematization,” 440.

¹³⁹ Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look*, 4.

¹⁴⁰ Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison. *Objectivity* (New York: Zone Books, 2010), 17.

¹⁴¹ Daston and Galison, *Objectivity*, 18.

¹⁴² Daston and Galison, *Objectivity*, 18.

¹⁴³ Daston and Galison, *Objectivity*, 22.

each referent with the aim to display “typical” objects in addition to objects that could be considered “anomalous.”¹⁴⁴ Scientific atlases were generally extensive and producing them necessarily required collaboration between scientists or naturalists, authors or author-groups, and illustrators; as a result, atlases emerged as “exemplary form[s] of collective empiricism.”¹⁴⁵

To introduce their chapter on “truth-to-nature,” Daston and Galison reference Linnaeus’s 1737 published collection of flora and plants, *Hortus Cliffortianus*, a collaboration between Linnaeus and botanical illustrator Georg Dionysius Ehret as an example of “seeking truth” – a precursor to seeking objectivity.¹⁴⁶ Like the practices of most Enlightenment naturalists at this time, Linnaeus’s methodologies of “describing, depicting, and classifying plants were openly, even aggressively selective.”¹⁴⁷ The goal of this endeavor was to create an image of each species’ “real plant archetype” – a type understood as “truer to nature – and therefore more real – than any actual specimen.”¹⁴⁸ In the making of 18th-century atlases, the convergence of art and science also muddled “judgments of truth and beauty”¹⁴⁹ where artists were expected to translate the visions of naturalists as if they both viewed the world through the same eyes – also referred to as *four-eyed sight*.¹⁵⁰ Artists and naturalists alike did not seem to distinguish between “the demands of truth and those of beauty” and while natural history illustrations were acclaimed within the realms of the decorative and fine arts, there still remained a strong correlation between beauty and scientific correctness.¹⁵¹ In the end, the finalized image of any given specimen was more of an idealized aura of the referent than that of objectivity.

¹⁴⁴ Daston and Galison, *Objectivity*, 21-26.

¹⁴⁵ Daston and Galison, *Objectivity*, 26.

¹⁴⁶ Daston and Galison, *Objectivity*, 57-58.

¹⁴⁷ Daston and Galison, *Objectivity*, 57-59.

¹⁴⁸ Daston and Galison, *Objectivity*, 60.

¹⁴⁹ Daston and Galison, *Objectivity*, 79.

¹⁵⁰ Daston and Galison, *Objectivity*, 84.

¹⁵¹ Daston and Galison, *Objectivity*, 102.

By the mid-19th century, the epistemic virtue of truth-to-nature seemed to trigger “a crisis of anxiety and denial, for [it] seemed to be [an] invitation[n] to subjectivity.”¹⁵² Striving to achieve an objective image was not the only concern for scientists, it was also about ethics. The “all-too-human scientists” now had to deliberately resist aestheticizing, simplifying, or idealizing nature.¹⁵³ Early techniques of reproduction including self-registering instruments, cameras, wax molds, and other devices, were utilized to capture nature with the aim of eliminating human intervention.¹⁵⁴ While these technologies did not completely eradicate truth-to-nature, mechanical objectivity symbolized a “new and powerful alternative scientific vision – blind sight.”¹⁵⁵ As humans were considered to be emotional, intellectual, and moral, machines were understood to stand in for “the limits of human senses” possessing traits including: patience, indefatigability, and alertness.¹⁵⁶ The attempt to abolish human subjectivity, however, was also to deny the self. Mechanical objectivity was about the will to repress temptation and desire, to see without distortion, and ultimately achieve “disciplined automaticity.”¹⁵⁷ As earlier atlas makers sought to control and discipline their artists with the interest in seeking “truth,” later atlas makers shifted blame and became self-conscious of their own capabilities to impose human interpretation and sacrifice an authentic image.¹⁵⁸

The photograph became emblematic of non-human-interventionalist objectivity.¹⁵⁹ While 19th-century photographs sacrificed certain aspects that drawing afforded including “pedagogical efficacy, colo[u]r, depth of field, and even diagnostic utility”¹⁶⁰ and were not always more

¹⁵² Daston and Galison, *Objectivity*, 66.

¹⁵³ Daston and Galison, *Objectivity*, 120.

¹⁵⁴ Daston and Galison, *Objectivity*, 121.

¹⁵⁵ Daston and Galison, *Objectivity*, 124.

¹⁵⁶ Daston and Galison, *Objectivity*, 139.

¹⁵⁷ Daston and Galison, *Objectivity*, 179.

¹⁵⁸ Daston and Galison, *Objectivity*, 185.

¹⁵⁹ Daston and Galison, *Objectivity*, 187.

¹⁶⁰ Daston and Galison, *Objectivity*, 179.

faithful to nature than paintings, the camera was understood to eliminate human agency.¹⁶¹ The authors pose an interesting dilemma with 19th-century photography: if light sensitive plates copy “everything that does not belong to the object with frightening objectivity,” what happens when there is too much or too little light?¹⁶² Inconsistencies were common in both the production and post-production of mechanical photographic processes. By the turn of the 20th century, proponents of mechanical objectivity were beginning to waver for they could no longer rely on the promise of automaticity.¹⁶³ Further, according to historians of science, 19th-century photographers, scientists, and their audience, acknowledged that photographs could be “faked, retouched, or otherwise manipulated.”¹⁶⁴ Mechanical objectivity became an emblem of an unattainable goal which eventually led to the development of the subsequent epistemic virtue: trained judgment.

Acknowledging the difficulties in relying on solely mechanical objectivity, 20th-century scientists recognized the “necessity of seeing scientifically through an interpretive eye” in the making and using of images.¹⁶⁵ No longer a polarizing distinction between “objective virtue” and “subjective vice,” mid-20th-century scientists recognized the importance of leaving room for making hypotheses based on trained intuition.¹⁶⁶ Leaving behind both the *four-eyed sight* of truth-to-nature, or the *blind sight* of mechanical objectivity, trained judgment cultivated a *physiognomic sight* – a sort of negotiation between maker and user of atlas images to “synthesize, highlight, and grasp relationships in ways that were not reducible to mechanical procedure.”¹⁶⁷ There was a shift in responsibility towards the *user* of atlas images in the process

¹⁶¹ Daston and Galison, *Objectivity*, 187.

¹⁶² Daston and Galison, *Objectivity*, 188.

¹⁶³ Daston and Galison, *Objectivity*, 189.

¹⁶⁴ Daston and Galison, *Objectivity*, 133.

¹⁶⁵ Daston and Galison, *Objectivity*, 311.

¹⁶⁶ Daston and Galison, *Objectivity*, 312-313.

¹⁶⁷ Daston and Galison, *Objectivity*, 314.

of making meaning; rather than the “burden of representation” falling to the image itself, scientists relied on trained readers to render their own judgments and connections.¹⁶⁸ Professional training also birthed a newfound confidence – and even faith – in scientists who could rely on their scientific selves in tandem with instruments of mechanical objectivity.¹⁶⁹ In the mid-late-20th century, the most esteemed scientists were the ones who had spent the most amount of time with the materials or entities; in other words, subjective-trained insight carried more weight than the technical abilities of a machine.¹⁷⁰ The authors state that what emerged out of the exercise of trained judgement was the desire for realism rather than naturalism. If atlas images were manipulated, they were done so by “build[ing] on the natural”¹⁷¹ and highlighting specific features with the ultimate goal to redefine realism – “a realism explicitly positioned against the automaticity of unvarnished photographic naturalism” or mechanical objectivity.¹⁷²

Daston and Galison’s book traces a history of how the three main epistemic virtues of scientific objectivity – truth-to-nature, mechanical objectivity, and trained judgment – emerged in response to the previous mode; and they state: “historical sequence matters”¹⁷³ to understand the significance of successive evolution. Today, all three virtues accumulate and coexist in the field of scientific image-making. The central claim of their book is that “ways of scientific seeing are where body and mind, pedagogy and research, knower and known intersect”¹⁷⁴ indicating that pure objectivity does not exist. Objectivity is rather a negotiation between self and other and a collaboration between art and science. I refer to Daston’s series as a “quasi-record” of weeds as fully situated in that history of scientific imagery: his images are not providing an objective

¹⁶⁸ Daston and Galison, *Objectivity*, 315.

¹⁶⁹ Daston and Galison, *Objectivity*, 313.

¹⁷⁰ Daston and Galison, *Objectivity*, 342-344.

¹⁷¹ Daston and Galison, *Objectivity*, 355.

¹⁷² Daston and Galison, *Objectivity*, 357.

¹⁷³ Daston and Galison, *Objectivity*, 371.

¹⁷⁴ Daston and Galison, *Objectivity*, 369.

perspective of weeds (neither a subjective perspective), but rather a negotiation between himself – as both artist and naturalist, a maker of representations and photographic records – and weeds. In the creation of his images, he uses instruments of mechanical objectivity (namely, photography); however, he does not create a product of what 19th-century atlas makers would have referred to as *blind sight*. He has, instead, not attempted to erase human intervention, but rather like trained judgment, Dadson “redefines realism”¹⁷⁵ using artistic strategies that *enhance* weeds. Daston and Galison argue that “not only do images make the atlas; atlas images make the science.”¹⁷⁶ This is a crucial sentence when we consider Dadson’s series as a countervisuality. Presenting weeds as a “quasi-record” – combining documentation and artifice (what I call below “gentle intervention”) – aims to redistribute the sensible in relation to dominant visualities of weeds as nuisance, making weeds visible as significant contributors to the sustainability of our planet.

2.4: Gentle Intervention

Gentle Land Art: Richard Long and Andy Goldsworthy

This final section of chapter two looks at Dadson’s artistic strategy of what I call “gentle intervention,” referring to the elements of artifice present in his series. Similar to and influenced by Wall’s notion of near-documentary, Dadson also employs a sort of staging prior to the photographic process. This intervention occurs within the natural landscape much like the enactment of the pioneering land artists of the 1970s. Beginning in the mid-1960s, the land art movement emerged as a rejection of the “cosmopolitan commodification of the white cube,”¹⁷⁷ operating as time-based, ephemeral, and site-specific.¹⁷⁸ Many land artists manipulated the

¹⁷⁵ Daston and Galison, *Objectivity*, 357.

¹⁷⁶ Daston and Galison, *Objectivity*, 22.

¹⁷⁷ Jeff Kastner, *Land Art and Environmental Art* (London: Phaidon Press Limited, 1998), 12.

¹⁷⁸ Kastner, *Land Art*, 12, 15.

landscape through the destruction of rock cliffs and by chiseling holes into the earth using instruments of “mechanized modernity.”¹⁷⁹ A highly-acclaimed example is Smithson’s *Spiral Jetty* from 1970, created by significantly displacing and manipulating the land into a spiral formation at a site off the shoreline of Great Salt Lake, Utah. Art writer Jeff Kastner argues that the earlier works of land artists, especially American artists, were acts of “wilderness-colonizing” and that they “paralleled the ideas of conquest and exploitation that characterized the industrial era.”¹⁸⁰ Art historian John Beardsley counters Kastner’s claim stressing that early land artists had “ambitions to articulate, even to shape, the contemporary relation to nature” thus contributing to a positive point of departure for the land art movement.¹⁸¹ The “machine-driven extravagances”¹⁸² of American land artists such as Smithson, in addition to Michael Heizer and Walter De Maria, were only a component of the land art of the 1960s (and 1970s). Artists such as Richard Long, and later Andy Goldsworthy, responded to the more invasive – and potentially ecologically damaging – practices of the aforementioned artists and instead, utilized strategies that I refer to as “gentle intervention[s]” upon the landscape. Utilizing their own bodies to gently suffuse the landscape, the artists’ subtle interventions highlight what is already existing in nature, rather than producing completely new forms. As I will expand upon below, Long, Goldsworthy, and Dadson, all occupy the intersection between the human corporeal form and the natural materials and processes of the environment, thus creating what curator Paul Moorehouse refers to as “an index – a trace of the relation between man and nature.”¹⁸³

¹⁷⁹ Kastner, *Land Art*, 12.

¹⁸⁰ Kastner, *Land Art*, 16.

¹⁸¹ John Beardsley, *Earthworks and Beyond* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1998), 7.

¹⁸² Mark Cheetham, *Landscape into Eco Art: Articulations of Nature Since the ‘60s* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2018), 6.

¹⁸³ Paul Moorehouse, “The Intricacy of the Skein; The Complexity of the Web: Richard Long’s Art,” in *Richard Long: Walking in Circles* (New York: George Braziller, 1991), 38.

British artist Richard Long (b. 1945)'s walking works of the 1960s became influential gestures within this pivotal moment in art where the matter and materiality of the art object was challenged.¹⁸⁴ For Long, this intervention included the act of walking as a medium, while consequentially developing his own relationship between art and the natural landscape by utilizing exclusively raw materials found within the environment and enacting subtle interventions upon them.¹⁸⁵ Long's walking series was originally initiated in 1964 when he was still a student at the West of England College of Art in Bristol.¹⁸⁶ He began by rolling a small snowball across a field near campus. As this snowball grew in size, it left behind an increasingly substantial trail in its path (fig. 11); it was this very line formed in the snowball's wake that fascinated Long and instigated his practice of line-making that extended over several decades.¹⁸⁷ It was in 1967, however, when Long created lines using his physical body in space as an anti-materialist methodology. *A Line Made by Walking* from 1967 (fig. 12) documents a line Long established by repeatedly pacing back and forth along a path the artist progressively formed by flattening the grass underfoot.¹⁸⁸ For Long, the act of walking is a durational and self-conscious experience that enables him to observe his own position in relation to the environment.¹⁸⁹ Curator Paul Moorehouse considers the temporality of the walk and its lack of permanence to be "intimately bound up with its subject" as nature, too, is "synonymous with movement and change."¹⁹⁰ Cultural geography scholar Tim Edensor rather poetically describes Long's

¹⁸⁴ Clarrie Wallis, "Richard Long: Curator's Talk," September 14, 2009, Tate Britain, Recorded lecture, 59:35, <https://www.tate.org.uk/context-comment/audio/richard-long-curators-talk>.

¹⁸⁵ Wallis, "Richard Long: Curator's Talk."

¹⁸⁶ Wallis, "Richard Long: Curator's Talk."

¹⁸⁷ Wallis, "Richard Long: Curator's Talk."

¹⁸⁸ Some of his walking works also employ the gesture of dragging his boot heel along the earth or using both his feet and his hands to make an imprint. Paul Moorehouse, "The Intricacy of the Skein; The Complexity of the Web: Richard Long's Art," in *Richard Long: Walking in Circles* (New York: George Braziller, 1991), 70.

¹⁸⁹ Moorehouse, "The Intricacy of the Skein," 33.

¹⁹⁰ Moorehouse, "The Intricacy of the Skein," 37.

metronomic walks as being accompanied by a host of natural rhythmic processes including the phases and cycles of the moon, tides, winds, and seasons, in addition to the lifespans and renewals of plants and animals.¹⁹¹ It is in this way that Long's motion can be recognized as contributing – or at least, adjacent – to the sustainability and temporality of the natural processes of our planet.

Long's walking works refrain from invasively manipulating the landscape; rather, he gently modifies and adjusts the natural placements of rocks or vegetation into simple shapes.¹⁹² In fact, art historian Anne Seymour remarked on Long's touch, referring to it as “famously light” as he, unlike the more “aggressive” land artists of the period, never created permanent changes to the landscape.¹⁹³ While his organic sculptures are ephemeral and do not appear to leave a lasting impression on the planet, Long explicitly considers how his actions may indeed leave a trace upon the surface of the earth in the same vein as how, over time, subtle processes and gestures that occur in nature (e.g. wind, rain, minor seismic movement) can enact permanent changes.¹⁹⁴ The artist refers to his sculptures as “occupying a territory between two ideological positions namely that of making ‘monuments’ or, conversely, of ‘leaving only footprints’.”¹⁹⁵ It is between these two opposing notions that Long's work assumes a posture that is both anthropocentric and ecocentric. This intermediary locale is reminiscent of Pollan's observation of the disharmonious tension that arises between human and plant temporalities where adaptation is necessary for coexistence.

¹⁹¹ Tim Edensor, “Walking in Rhythms: Place, Regulation, Style, and the Flow of Experience,” *Visual Studies* 25, no. 1 (2010), 75.

¹⁹² Wallis, “Richard Long: Curator's Talk.

¹⁹³ Anne Seymour and Hamish Fulton, *Richard Long: Walking in Circles* (New York: George Braziller, 1991), 9.

¹⁹⁴ Moorehouse, “The Intricacy of the Skein, 37.

¹⁹⁵ Seymour and Fulton, *Richard Long*, 68.

British artist Andy Goldsworthy (b. 1956) works predominantly within the natural landscape, making sculptures out of systematically-assembled stones, ice, petals, leaves, and branches. Throughout his career, Goldsworthy has frequently worked with naturally-occurring coloured leaves and used them to highlight or encase stones, tree branches, holes, and other forms discovered in nature. In *Rowan leaves laid around a hole, Yorkshire Sculpture Park, 1987* (fig. 13), Goldsworthy meticulously arranged the yellow, orange, red, and blackened leaves of the Rowan tree around a hole in the ground; in *Red leaves on cracked earth, 2006* (fig. 14), the artist tightly assembled vibrant red leaves within the parameters of a triangle shape formed by cracks in the earth. As a result, his sculptures bring into existence the shapes and forms that are already present within the landscape. Art historian Lenore Metrick-Chen addresses Goldsworthy's works in these very terms, describing them as "restor[ing] some kind of clairvoyance, allowing us to see clearly what has always been there."¹⁹⁶ I consider the term *clairvoyance* to be particularly useful as it pertains to perceiving things or events beyond ordinary sensory contact. This suggests that ordinarily, humans have the tendency to filter out information due to its ubiquity in our everyday lives or because we are conditioned to do so. "Restoring some kind of clairvoyance" instead, indicates that Goldsworthy's gestures heighten our perception and enlighten the senses to finally see what is already visible.

Curator Linda Weintraub describes Goldsworthy's work as possessing two sets of values. One pertains to its anthropocentric nature, as the artist manipulates the landscape and asserts his control over nonhuman entities, materials, and conditions; yet, on the other hand, his work submits to an ecocentric narrative insofar as "it is consistent with protecting and enhancing

¹⁹⁶ Lenore Metrick, "Disjunctions in Nature," *Sculpture* 22, no. 5 (2003): 29.

ecosystem functions, not commanding them.”¹⁹⁷ The artist’s ephemeral assemblages are enacted through gentle intervention using the body. While he sometimes employs machines, tools, and other forms of technology to sculpt the organic materials he gathers, he predominantly uses his own saliva – or feathers, thorns, reeds, and water – as an adhesive, claiming that it works more efficiently than the alternative.¹⁹⁸ While his works utilize only the organic materials available at each site, his sculptures are conceptualized and fabricated, rather than being simply found, as-is, within nature; they are, without question, the product of human hands.¹⁹⁹ As he works, Goldsworthy must adapt to the variability of climate, season, and weather; as a result, his capability to complete and photograph a sculpture is dependent on the environmental conditions of the areas wherein he works.²⁰⁰ If and when the climate cooperates and Goldsworthy is able to assemble a sculpture, it is only a matter of time until the works starts to dissolve, decay, melt, or be blown down. In effect, Goldsworthy’s considerate bodily intervention succumbs to the demands of the environment as he works to highlight already-present forms.

Gentle Intervention: Dadson

Over the course of the summer of 2019, Dadson spent time within the empty lot within the 2950 block of West 4th Avenue in Vancouver, BC, where he became intimately acquainted with several unplanted species growing within the surrounding chain-linked fence. To render visible specific plant species within space, Dadson used his own biodegradable paint formula, a concoction of earth pigments (indigo, cochineal, ochre, and charcoal) and casein binder (milk-based). To apply the paint to the landscape, he uses a spray-painting machine which enables the

¹⁹⁷ Linda Weintraub, *To Life! Eco Art In Pursuit of a Sustainable Planet* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 2012), 184.

¹⁹⁸ Andy Goldsworthy, “The Glenmorangie Lecture: Andy Goldsworthy,” February 9, 2012, National Museum of Scotland, lecture, 1:08:38, <https://www.nms.ac.uk/collections-research/our-research/featured-projects/early-medieval-scotland/andy-goldsworthy-lecture/>.

¹⁹⁹ Goldsworthy, “The Glenmorangie Lecture.”

²⁰⁰ Weintraub, *To Life!*, 184.

material to be evenly distributed across the leaves, stems, and blossoms. The sections of plants he painted for this series were unexpectedly small, at no more than a few feet in dimension. Figures 15 and 16 provide insight into what occurred at the lot; in these photographs, provided by the artist, we are able to observe how insignificant in size the painted sections actually were. As I will expand upon in chapter three, the dimensions of the finalized inkjet print far surpass the dimensions of the actual painted section within the lot. It is in this minimal gesture that a significant emblem of visibility is born. Similar to the two aforementioned artists' works (Long and Goldsworthy) that explore organic materials, in the making of their land works, Dadson's work is also ephemeral and may last hours, days, or no more than a few weeks, depending on the climate and environmental conditions. As Wall implemented what he refers to as "blatant artifice" into his photographic compositions in staging of his tableaux vivant or in presenting his images on a large scale and back lit using florescent tubes, Dadson experiments with similar techniques while, at the same time, respecting the ecological significance of the species growing within the lot. Like Long and Goldsworthy, Dadson uses his own body to suffuse the landscape and create an impression onto the landscape with the aim to highlight and reveal what is already present in nature.

CHAPTER 3: DECENTERING THE HUMAN VIA NONHUMAN PHOTOGRAPHY

3.1: Introduction

Chapter three argues for the creative, life-making potential of photography through Dadson's advanced photographic processes which facilitate the production of hyper-detailed imagery, allowing weeds to be presented at a large and domineering scale. Chapter two revealed the ways Dadson's photographic series present weeds as significant contributors to the sustainability of our plant through the "quasi-record" – a combination of documentary and

artifice – and by extension, chapter three focuses predominantly on the unique capacities of advanced photographic systems and process that actually *enliven* weeds by providing imagery that pushes beyond human sight. I begin by tracing a short history of film and digital photography to establish how the successive nature of the technological evolution of both photographic formats has relied on materials and chemical interaction to heighten the “life-like” resolution of the photographic image; establishing this history is productive prior to introducing Joanna Zylińska’s notion of nonhuman photography which ultimately argues for the decentering of humans in *all* photographic processes by affirming the agency of the technological apparatus itself, while simultaneously recognizing the strategic role of the human in the image-making process. As technology at once appears lifeless and inanimate, Zylińska argues for seeing photography not only as a life-making process, but she argues for seeing *life itself* as photographic; to me, this line of thinking is reminiscent of Michel Foucault’s interpretation of the Linnaean system of taxonomic nomenclature because while systems of categorization (and photographic processes) appear to entrap nature, they also “tak[e] from nature precisely the tension between being and becoming, between chaos and order.”²⁰¹ Next, I return to the photographic techniques Jeff Wall employed in the early 90s while developing his own tradition of photoconceptualism. Wall’s strategy of photomontage becomes paramount when understanding Dadson’s processes which also involve the layering and merging of image plates during post-production; and yet, the sophisticated photographic technology and editing software available today increases the capabilities that were once available in the late 20th century. Here, I describe the highly technical procedure of capturing each individual species of plants, proving that the technological apparatuses and specific technical steps, together inform the final result:

²⁰¹ Kessler, “Systematization,” 439.

presenting weeds as intricate, high-resolution, and larger-than-life. Lastly, I discuss the vertical perspective of Dadson's images, through Leo Steinberg's notion of flatbed aesthetics, which helps to describe how his images interpolate the viewer, inviting the spectator in closer to experience the weeds as life-like.

3.2: Brief History of Photography

Film Photography

One of the most pivotal moments in the development of film photography came to fruition in the early 19th century. In 1822, French physicist Joseph Nicéphore Niépce successively made a permanent image by coating a pewter plate using asphaltum (a material that hardens with light exposure) and after exposing the plate, he removed the unexposed and unhardened asphalt in a solvent, thus producing a "crude" first permanent photograph.²⁰² Artist Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre began working with Niépce around 1826 with the aim to develop his interest in the fusion between art and science.²⁰³ Even after Niépce's death in 1833, Daguerre continued developing the asphalt printing process, but found that using silver salts to be significantly more time-effective and produced what was later deemed by the Academy of Science and the Academy of Art as the *Daguerrotype*; this process was further adapted with Sir John Herschel's discovery of sodium hyposulphite which proved to be an excellent solvent for silver halides.²⁰⁴ The long exposure length of this process made it suitable for still-life and landscape subjects until 1840 when advancements in lenses, and the shift away from silver iodide and towards silver bromoimide, facilitated a shorter length of exposure to less than a minute.²⁰⁵

²⁰² Elizabeth Allen and Sophie Triantaphillidou, *The Manual of Photography* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010), 7.

²⁰³ Allen and Triantaphillidou, *The Manual of Photography*, 7.

²⁰⁴ Allen and Triantaphillidou, *The Manual of Photography*, 7.

²⁰⁵ Allen and Triantaphillidou, *The Manual of Photography*, 7.

In the 1840s, British inventor William Henry Fox Talbot's reproducible, negative-positive printing technique, became the dominant form of photography of the 19th and 20th centuries.²⁰⁶ He began by using "separate applications of silver nitrate and sodium chloride and exposing the paper while still wet," a process he called *photogenic printing*.²⁰⁷ Shortly thereafter, he patented the *Calotype* process which used "paper sensitized in silver iodide and gallic acid"; the main difference between the Daguerreotype and the Calotype is that Daguerre's produced a positive image, whereas Talbot's produced a paper negative – the first of its kind.²⁰⁸ While the Daguerreotype produced a superior image, the Calotype was reproducible and became the foundation of modern photography because of its reproducibility.²⁰⁹ While Talbot's faded images are almost illegible to our 21st-century eye, at the time of their production, he was fascinated by the detail recorded in the images and with a magnifying glass, the images revealed to Talbot features that were undetected in the moment when he captured the scene; visual and critical studies scholar Shawn Michelle Smith states that it was – and is – common for a camera operator to discover new information he had no notion of at the time of the picture's capture.²¹⁰ In 1936, this concept would later be deemed by Walter Benjamin, as the "optical unconscious" – a notion that would crystalize his understanding of photography as a medium that reveals elements that are unobserved by the human eye; elements that cannot be seen without the technology. ²¹¹ Smith eloquently states,

Photography revolutionized perception, making the invisible visible. But as it enlarged the visual world, bringing new things into sight, it also demonstrated how much

²⁰⁶ Shawn Michelle Smith, *At the Edge of Sight: Photography and the Unseen* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 3.

²⁰⁷ Allen and Triantaphillidou, *The Manual of Photography*, 7.

²⁰⁸ Allen and Triantaphillidou, *The Manual of Photography*, 7.

²⁰⁹ Allen and Triantaphillidou, *The Manual of Photography*, 7.

²¹⁰ Smith, *At the Edge of Sight*, 3-4.

²¹¹ Smith, *At the Edge of Sight*, 4. Andrés Mario Zervigón, "Photography's Weimar-Era Proliferation and Walter Benjamin's Optical Unconscious," *Photography and the Optical Unconscious*, ed. Shawn Michelle Smith and Sharon Sliwinski (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017).

ordinarily remains imperceptible. In other words, photography revealed the limitations of human sight even as it offered its prosthetic compensation.²¹²

Smith's statement emphasizes the nature of discovery offered *through* the photographic process and its ability to emphasize or reveal details that we, as humans, ordinarily filter out. While Talbot's Calotype offered the means to reproduce images and introduced new methods of discovery beyond human perception, image scientists continued to seek materials that could facilitate greater image clarity. This moment in history aligns with the epistemic virtue of "mechanical objectivity" that I outlined in chapter two, where the aim was to attain an image that was considered free from human intervention. From 1868, gelatin became – and still remains to be – an "important constituent of photographic materials" in its capacity to "enable and enhance" photographic processes.²¹³ In 1885, photographer John Carbutt used a gelatin-based emulsion to pioneer the first sheet film, and quickly following, inventor Henry H. Reichenbach and entrepreneur George Eastman developed roll film using a nitrocellulose base in addition to producing a new camera: the Kodak, in 1888. This camera was a pivotal development in photography insofar as it was portable and soon gained mass popularity.²¹⁴ These materials became the foundation for modern photographic processes and have, of course, been adapted and enhanced overtime; for example, today's photographic materials include an "emulsion" of light-sensitive silver halide crystals (chloride, bromide or iodide) suspended in gelatin and laminated onto a malleable and yet stable "transparent plastic or paper backing."²¹⁵

The main difference between the initial film out of the end of the 19th century and the film that is available today is the materials' "sensitivity to different wavelengths of radiation

²¹² Smith, *At the Edge of Sight*, 8.

²¹³ Allen and Triantaphillidou, *The Manual of Photography*, 7-8.

²¹⁴ Allen and Triantaphillidou, *The Manual of Photography*, 8.

²¹⁵ Allen and Triantaphillidou, *The Manual of Photography*, 8.

(spectral sensitivity)” which is the key element that affects *what* is being recorded (e.g. early photographic materials could not record longer green or red wavelengths and resulted in a muddying of contrasting tones).²¹⁶ Like the successive nature of the development of film photography more generally, colour photography also evolved in this way out of many experiments and subsequent adaptations. Today, film and paper colour photographic materials are made with the “integral tripack structure, in which red-, green- and blue-sensitive silver halide emulsions produce layers of cyan, magenta and yellow dyes” which, when brought together, “subtract wavelengths of light from white light when it is projected through a piece of film.”²¹⁷

It was not until 1981 that the first electronic camera entered the public domain: the Sony Mavica; it was developed using a charge-coupled device (CCD) image sensor, which consists of metal oxide semiconductor (MOS) capacitors that are arranged in a grid so as to correspond to a pixel position.²¹⁸ With light exposure, an electric charge is ignited through an electrode on top of the capacitor which then gets transferred from one pixel to the next, and finally transferred off the chip; as a result, the signal transfers and encodes itself as a “stream of digital data.”²¹⁹ This technology emerged alongside developments in computer technology and in many ways, cameras quickly became more streamlined, miniaturized, and user-friendly because of the evolution and popularity of the computer. Other variations have since been developed such as the CMOS image sensor which was a cheaper and more compact alternative but one that initially created noisier, lower quality images than those created with the CCD sensor.²²⁰ Earlier digital

²¹⁶ Allen and Triantaphillidou, *The Manual of Photography*, 9.

²¹⁷ Allen and Triantaphillidou, *The Manual of Photography*, 9.

²¹⁸ Allen and Triantaphillidou, *The Manual of Photography*, 11.

²¹⁹ Allen and Triantaphillidou, *The Manual of Photography*, 11.

²²⁰ Allen and Triantaphillidou, *The Manual of Photography*, 11.

cameras exclusively produced monochrome images, the next step was to produce colour. Through several trials in developing colour-producing technology, 2002 brought a ground-breaking development with the invention of the Foveon™ sensor which, in many ways, mimicked the tripack silver halide materials utilized in film photography, taking from that technology the foundational idea that red, green, and blue wavelengths of light reach varying depths within a silicon substrate; as a consequence, Foveon™ sensors produced high-quality, full-resolution colour images.²²¹

As computer technologies continually advanced into the 21st century, imaging devices followed suit; one of these technologies was the computer monitor. While monitors were originally comprised of cathode ray tube (CRT) technology in which pixels are created with “different combined intensities” of red, green, and blue phosphors, today’s CRT displays have been predominantly replaced by Liquid Crystal Display (LCD) technology where each pixel on screen is also comprised of red, green, and blue (RGB) colours,²²² however, as the name suggests, LCD technology also contains a layer of liquid crystal – a material whose consistency is between liquid and “crystalline solids.”²²³ This is the very technology employed today in the most advanced devices including Apple’s latest iPhone 11 (2019).

In this very brief history of the evolution of film photography and digital photography two key motivations stand out as significantly orientating that evolution: the first was the aim to attain the clearest, most accurate images with the highest resolution possible; and the second was marketability and consumer accessibility. In the last decade, the photography industry has shifted in several significant ways, despite its continual quest for high resolution images. Already in the

²²¹ Allen and Triantaphillidou, *The Manual of Photography*, 11.

²²² Allen and Triantaphillidou, *The Manual of Photography*, 11.

²²³ Harry G. Walton, “Liquid Crystal Display: Electronics,” Britannica, accessed on June 26, 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/technology/liquid-crystal-display>.

1980s but much more firmly since the mid-2000s, surveillance devices have also made their way into the consumer market, shifting what would ordinarily be enforced by human vigilance to sensors and computer software.²²⁴ Surveillance devices have become so ubiquitous that it is “no longer possible to walk down a street or buy groceries without being watched and recorded.”²²⁵ As I mentioned in my introduction, Mirzoeff conflates technologies of surveillance with “the place of visualization” in that it “literally and metaphorically continue[s] to distance itself from the subject being viewed.”²²⁶ Within the following section, I discuss some of the recent scholarship that has emerged in the last decade to address advanced technology such as those devices used in surveillance, that allow to somewhat nuance Mirzoeff’s large claim. Later in the section, I look at how Dadson’s processes are a countervisuality *through* his use of advanced technology: repurposing that technology and fully embracing the quest for high-resolution images, his photographs work to negate the “aura of authority” that surveillance systems perpetuate.

3.3 Photography as a Life-Making Process

In her article “The Creative Power of Nonhuman Photography” (2015), which eventually lead to her book *Nonhuman Photography* (2017), media theorist Joanna Zylińska argues that “there is more to photography than meets the (human) eye and that *all photography to some extent is nonhuman*.”²²⁷ Zylińska suggests that while an account of nonhuman photography is “strongly attached to the concept of the human,” her project ultimately aims to decenter that narrative.²²⁸ She begins by examining a pivotal text in 21st-century photography, which I will

²²⁴ Julie K. Petersen, *Introduction to Surveillance Studies* (Boca Raton: CRC Press, 2013), 3.

²²⁵ Petersen, *Introduction to Surveillance Studies*, 4.

²²⁶ Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look*, 17.

²²⁷ Zylińska, “The Creative Power of Nonhuman Photography,” 134.

²²⁸ Zylińska, “The Creative Power of Nonhuman Photography,” 135-6.

expand upon below: art historian John Tagg's essay "Mindless Photography" (2008), to address some recent theories that look at the relationship between "human and nonhuman agents, technologies and practices."²²⁹ Zylinska uses Tagg's article as a catalyst for her central argument which aims to consider advanced photographic technology not as something dehumanizing, as Tagg believes, but something that is beyond the human and one that can be embraced as a creative, worldmaking process. Dadson's use of advanced photographic technology could, at first, appear counterproductive when used as a strategy that aims to present weeds as significant contributors to the sustainability of our planet because of the surveillance "all-seeing" capacities of that technology; however, Zylinska's notion of nonhuman photography sees the agentic potential in the nonhuman aspect and transforms photography into a creative process of life, which aligns with Dadson's aim to advocate for weeds' "right to existence."²³⁰

Tagg's article looks at the CCTV system (introduced in 2003 to survey central London's congestion charge) and the visual rendering of data taken by a radio telescope in 2005 which captured solar dust cloud radiation in the Taurus Molecular Cloud (TMC). As opposed to the theories coming out of the 1970s and 1980s which attributed photography as a "site of human meaning," Tagg suggests that London's surveillance tracking device is an example of how "the relationship between the embodied human subject and the technical apparatus has been irrevocably broken," where human affectivity has been replaced by a "machinic enslavement."²³¹ Zylinska interprets Tagg's article to suggest that the type of photography that has no overt aim to provide pleasure can be attributed to "mindlessness, emptiness and, ultimately, death" and

²²⁹ Zylinska, "The Creative Power of Nonhuman Photography," 136.

²³⁰ Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look*, 4.

²³¹ Zylinska, "The Creative Power of Nonhuman Photography," 136.

further that it is the human's responsibility to be "life's subject and its arbiter."²³² Tagg's article does, however, draw awareness towards the immoral political implications of "global networked surveillance enacted by the likes of the NSA, GCHQ, Facebook and Google," (e.g. privacy violations and data leaking) and yet, to identify photography as the culprit of the "inhumane actions of its users is to misidentify the enemy."²³³ In other words, Tagg declares that photographic technology – and not humans – is responsible for the damages caused by surveillance. Overall, Zylinska views Tagg's article as one that mourns the loss of the humans of the past – humans who, according to Tagg, were solely responsible for themselves and "the body politic" – and she views this as a missed opportunity to develop a radical posthumanist photography.²³⁴

While Zylinska endorses Tagg's warning against the use of advanced photography for inhumane practices (such as the exploitation of personal privacy), she argues that "it is precisely in its nonhuman aspect that photography's creative, world-making, side can be identified."²³⁵ She predicates this line of argument partly on Czech philosopher Vilém Flusser who, in his book *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* (2000), states: "The photographic apparatus lies in wait for photography; it sharpens its teeth in readiness. This readiness to spring into action on the part of the apparatuses, their similarity to wild animals, is something to grasp hold of in the attempt to define the term etymologically."²³⁶ What Flusser recognizes in photography is the agency of the technological apparatus itself; Zylinska argues that this line of thought does not omit the human entirely, but rather that "self-contained human intentionality and sovereign human agency may

²³² Zylinska, "The Creative Power of Nonhuman Photography," 137. On the following page, Zylinska references Aristotle's claim that technology is merely a "tool for human existence, survival or improvement."

²³³ Zylinska, "The Creative Power of Nonhuman Photography," 138.

²³⁴ Zylinska, "The Creative Power of Nonhuman Photography," 138.

²³⁵ Zylinska, "The Creative Power of Nonhuman Photography," 139.

²³⁶ Zylinska, "The Creative Power of Nonhuman Photography," 139.

be too limited.”²³⁷ She connects Flusser’s theory with art historian Geoffrey Batchen’s argument in his book *Burning with Desire* (1997) that sees the evolution of photography (through the image scientists and inventors I outlined in the previous section such as Niépce, Daguerre, and Talbot) as a process that was dependent on the chemistry and materials necessary to produce and fix images; Zylinska suggests that in light of Flusser and Batchen, one could argue that “the photographic apparatus... contains but also exceeds a discrete human component [that] was awaiting the very invention of photography.”²³⁸

Zylinska takes the notion of the agentic value of nonhuman photography further by arguing for its life-making capabilities through understanding it in a “critical vitalist framework” – after Henri Bergson and Gilles Deleuze – in its inherent involvement with time, positioned “in a network of dynamic relations between present and past, movement and stasis, flow and cut.”²³⁹ Zylinska suggests that photography’s “proximity to life” can be attributed not only to its relation to temporality, but its liminal positionality between “object and practice,” and it “both being something here and now and as something always unfolding into something else.”²⁴⁰ Perhaps the most crucial section of Zylinska’s article is in her argument that life exists not only in photography, but that “life itself is photographic.”²⁴¹ She suggests that instead of viewing photographs as static, dead “mementoes of the past,” we need to remember that, in order to recognize something as an active process or flux, we need to see it “against the concept of a temporary stabilisation, interruption or cut into this process.”²⁴² Particularly relevant to this thesis, is Zylinska’s notion of the life-making potential of photography, not only in relation to

²³⁷ Zylinska, “The Creative Power of Nonhuman Photography,” 139.

²³⁸ Zylinska, “The Creative Power of Nonhuman Photography,” 140.

²³⁹ Zylinska, “The Creative Power of Nonhuman Photography,” 146.

²⁴⁰ Zylinska, “The Creative Power of Nonhuman Photography,” 146.

²⁴¹ Zylinska, “The Creative Power of Nonhuman Photography,” 146.

²⁴² Zylinska, “The Creative Power of Nonhuman Photography,” 147.

Bergson's and Deleuze's defense of vitalism, but in her reference to biologist Lynn Margulis's work on "the creative role of the imaging process in life."²⁴³ In her co-authored book *What is Life?* (1995), Margulis and her son Dorion Sagar reveal the ways that organic beings, such as animals, plants, and microorganisms, perceive and seek out their environment *through* an image making process. To recognize that something is food, a predator, or a sexual partner, living entities must temporarily fix an image of that something, "an existence placed half-way between the 'thing' and the 'representation'."²⁴⁴ Following Margulis's anthropological study, Zylinska maintains that photographs cannot be considered as mere representations, but rather as "one instantiation of this creative process of life."²⁴⁵

For Zylinska, the role of nonhuman agency in the making of photography (which turns it into a creative process of life) is highly productive when considering its capability to decenter the human. She states that the aim is not to "argue for a straightforward replacement of human vision with a machinic one," but rather to acknowledge the intertwinedness between the "organic and the machinic" and between the "technical and the discursive."²⁴⁶ As discussed in chapter one, in my brief examination of the work of N. Katherine Hayles, Michael Marder, and Michael Pollan, the decentering of humans is crucial to raise the agency of entities that are traditionally and historically condemned, which is central to Dadson's photographic series on weeds.

Margulis and Sagar's look at the image-making processes of animals, plants, and microorganisms is reminiscent of Hayles's theory of nonconscious cognition where she argues for the capabilities of those biological lifeforms who lack conscious modes of thinking (e.g. plants) but who still maintain channels of sensing and communication. Like Margulis and Sagar,

²⁴³ Zylinska, "The Creative Power of Nonhuman Photography," 148.

²⁴⁴ Zylinska, "The Creative Power of Nonhuman Photography," 148.

²⁴⁵ Zylinska, "The Creative Power of Nonhuman Photography," 148.

²⁴⁶ Zylinska, "The Creative Power of Nonhuman Photography," 148-9.

Hayles's project also aims to not undermine the achievements produced by humans (and other conscious thinkers) but rather to acknowledge the vital potential of other forms of cognition. Marder likewise supports the view that plants operate nonconsciously and yet, similarly to Margulis and Sagar as well as Hayles, states (after Aristotle) that plants have a vegetal soul and reach beyond their basic desires. Lastly, I mentioned Pollan's main observation that while human time and ecological time are disharmonious, humans can coexist with plants by respecting their hetero-temporalities. Zylinska is, of course, not speaking of the coalescence between humans and nature but rather between humans and machines and yet, all four of the aforementioned authors (and we can also include Haraway) argue for a decentering of the human to maintain the life potential of the nonhuman.

It is crucial here to emphasize that Zylinska's defense of nonhuman photography is a crucial one; her view cannot simply be opposed to thinkers or photographers who are critical of nonhuman technologies of vision. Mirzoeff, for example, considers visualization as a posture that "distance[s] itself from the subject being viewed" and that this view can be enacted through aerial photography and satellites which perpetuates authoritative domination and surveillance.²⁴⁷ Zylinska, however, argues for the agentic value in the technological apparatus itself, seeing it as having creative, and worldmaking capabilities. Zylinska is looking for a co-created, mutual recognition between the organic and the machinic, fully aware and critical to the inhumane practices that advanced photographic technologies have afforded.²⁴⁸

It is critical to examine Dadson's series of photographs through Zylinska's notion of nonhuman photography, particularly the idea that photographs are not "mere representations" but

²⁴⁷ Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look*, 17.

²⁴⁸ Zylinska, "The Creative Power of Nonhuman Photography," 139.

rather they are an “instantiation of the creative process of life.”²⁴⁹ The argument that *life itself is photographic* is imperative in the understanding of these images as brief moments of stasis within the flux of plant living, rather than understanding them as emblems of a past life. This notion aligns with the claim that Dadson’s series presents weeds as dynamic contributors to the sustainability of our planet, reminding us of their vigour, potency, and liveliness. Zylinska’s argument can also be understood in light of the steps Dadson took in the artistic production of this series: at first, he gently intervened upon the landscape using his corporeal form; and during the photographic process, he *relied* on the technological apparatuses, and their agentic capacities, to co-create a mutual relationship between machine and weeds in order to bring nonhuman entities (e.g. weeds) into existence – notably by exploring the high resolution capacities of photography, which far surpass human vision to the point of enabling surveillance or aerial photography. Interestingly, high-resolution is not explored here, as we will see, to reinforce the panoptic possibilities of photography – the “all-seeing” potential of technology – but the “closer-seeing” by which weeds are made alive. Rather than viewing advanced photographic technology as something that has potentially damaging consequences (following Tagg), Zylinska, like Dadson, acknowledges the potential of photography as akin to life itself and its ability to be a creative, worldmaking modality.

The next section of this chapter examines the technological apparatuses and corresponding processes employed in the creation of these images. These apparatuses were carefully selected by Dadson and his photographer who I was in direct conversation with. I begin by revisiting Jeff Wall’s early photographic processes as they, in my opinion, act as a predecessor to Dadson’s artistic techniques. It is important to recall Batchen’s remark referenced

²⁴⁹ Zylinska, “The Creative Power of Nonhuman Photography,” 148.

above which stated that it was the chemistry and materials that, in fact, guided image scientists in the development of film and digital photography; I believe that this rings true in the photographic processes that have guided artists and their own capabilities in the image-making process. As I will expand upon below, while Wall's photographic techniques of the late 90s are not entirely obsolete today, Dadson's creative decisions and parameters are based upon the technological apparatuses and software available in 2019. Without the equipment I will describe later, Dadson could not have produced images of weeds in such high-resolution and subsequently, at such a large scale. It is in these ways that the agentic capacity of nonhuman photography has informed Dadson's artistic strategies and simultaneously worked to decenter the human in that very process.

3.4: Dadson's Photographic Process: Layered Plates, Stitching, and Perspective

Returning to Jeff Wall's take on photoconceptualism, it is productive to examine some of the earlier techniques involved in achieving monumental, high-resolution photographs before turning to Dadson's advanced photographic processes. Wall's early photographic processes act as a predecessor to Dadson's artistic techniques – an innovation that Dadson's works both explore and reorient toward the photography of weeds. As I described in chapter two, the lightbox was one pivotal development in Vancouver photoconceptualism in its ability to emphasize colours and textures in the image, add literal dimension, in addition to its inherent capacity to illuminate. The lightbox, however, was not Wall's only contribution to developing and enhancing the photographic medium through technologies. Wagstaff suggests that Wall's use of digital technology to intensify his cinematic tableaux was “closer to the process of making paintings” and, following Charles Baudelaire, a way to be a “painter of modern life.”²⁵⁰ In 1993,

²⁵⁰ Wagstaff, *Jeff Wall Photographs*, 15.

Wall recreated Japanese artist Katsushika Hokusai's woodblock print *Travellers Caught in a Sudden Breeze* from the series *Thirty-six views of Mt. Fuji* (1830-3). Wall's version, entitled *A Sudden Gust of Wind (after Hokusai)* (fig. 17), was created by digitally merging and adjusting over one hundred photographs shot at varying times at a cranberry farm outside Vancouver.²⁵¹ Over a panoramic pastoral landscape, Wall shot each model individually eventually combining them during post-production to form a "seamless montage of images."²⁵² Wall once stated that he "always envied" a painter's ability to work gradually, "a little bit at a time," with the opportunity to occasionally step back and look at the overall composition before returning to the minute details.²⁵³ Digital technologies, then, expand the photographic moment. This ability to digitally intervene with time and scenic plausibility is another way Wall's works oscillate between fact and fiction and between documentary and artifice. The digital technology available today, and its affordances, unmistakably surpass the initial technologies Wall utilized in the early 90s; however, methodologies of composition, image layering and modification, and digital intervention more broadly, are used today by artists like Dadson. For the purpose of his project, so to enhance weeds and bring them into existence as significant entities, Dadson required the most advanced technology and software available. As I will soon describe, Dadson's processes use several techniques Wall employed (namely the merging and layering of images in the creation of the master document); however, the actual technological devices, themselves, differ from Wall's greatly in their capacity to attain a greater image resolution, which becomes paramount to Dadson's project.

²⁵¹ Wagstaff, *Jeff Wall Photographs*, 15.

²⁵² Wagstaff, *Jeff Wall Photographs*, 15.

²⁵³ Wagstaff, *Jeff Wall Photographs*, 15.

In order for Dadson to achieve his goal of attaining the highest quality images available, he hired a Vancouver photographer, Anthony Redpath, who specializes in commercial, editorial, and fine art photography, and has access to sophisticated digital photography equipment and software.²⁵⁴ Two camera systems were used to make the photographs: the Arca-Swiss M-Line Two Camera for MF and the Phase One XF IQ4 150MP Camera System. The Arca-Swiss model has been designed using the Orbix metric, a technology that allows lateral movements at the rear (rise and fall) and at the front (swings and tilt) without needing to refocus or recompose the shot;²⁵⁵ whereas, the Phase One Camera System, the world's first 151-megapixel camera, produces RAW images that have unprecedented resolution, detail, and can be "larger than life."²⁵⁶ Both camera systems are recognized as superior technology, most appropriate for editorial, commercial, and fine art purposes. The photographer chose to use a 110 mm lens, which is a focal length frequently used in portraiture, product photography, in addition to nature and wildlife imagery, which allows for close crops while remaining at a distance that "does not intrude upon the subject."²⁵⁷ The focal length refers to the "angle of view" or how much of the scene will be shot and the "magnification" or how expansive each element in the shot will be; a longer focal length, for example, indicates a tighter shot and a higher magnification, whereas, a shorter focal length equates to a wider angle and less magnification.²⁵⁸ It is evident from the

²⁵⁴ Anthony Redpath (photographer) in discussion with the author, February 20, 2020. Throughout this section, I speak about the photographic process. This information is derived from my ongoing conversations with the photographer, Anthony Redpath, either during the process onsite at the empty lot, or during a telephone conversation on February 20, 2020.

²⁵⁵ "Arca-Swiss M-Line Two Camera for MF," B&H, accessed June 22, 2020, https://www.bhphotovideo.com/c/product/980642-REG/arca_swiss_143692_m_line_two_camera_for.html/overview.

²⁵⁶ "XF IQ4 150 MP," Phase One, accessed June 22, 2020, <https://www.phaseone.com/en/Photography/XF-Camera-System/Camera-Configurations/XF-IQ4-150MP-Camera-System>.

²⁵⁷ Diane Berkenfeld, et al., "Understanding Focal Length," Nikon, accessed June 22, 2020, <https://www.nikonusa.com/en/learn-and-explore/a/tips-and-techniques/understanding-focal-length.html>.

²⁵⁸ Berkenfeld, "Understanding Focal Length."

specific selection of photographic equipment, that Dadson's aim is to get closer to weeds in order to bring them into a renewed reality, rather than to *surveille* them from a distance: his aesthetics are more of a seeing-closer rather than an all-seeing endeavor. While Mirzoeff's visualization is seen to remove us from the subject with the aim to perpetuate the "aura of authority," Dadson's series is a countervisuality *through* this combination of technological apparatuses that actually emphasize and intensify weeds; it is not only the devices that work to bring weeds into a dynamic existence, it is also Dadson's meticulous photographic process that takes into account the natural environment that supports the livelihood of weeds.

The actual enactment of capturing the living weeds, is complex and required specific adaptations during the set-up in order to accommodate the species of plant in addition to the environmental conditions present on the shoot day. The camera's position would be dependent on the dimensions of the plant being shot; to capture a section of plants 24 inches wide, for example, the camera needed to be approximately 3-4 feet from the subject. Within the empty lot, environmental factors also needed to be taken in account. Blowing wind, for example, would cause the image to go out of register, so Dadson and his photographer would wait for the wind to cease before proceeding.²⁵⁹ Another environmental consideration was the sun. High resolution camera systems require a stronger lighting source and Dadson specifically sought *hard light* for this project; "hard light" refers to focused, bright light that often casts harsh, defined shadows, rather than soft light which balances the transition between light and shadow.²⁶⁰ In order to achieve hard light, Dadson and his photographer used a combination of natural sunlight and artificial light sources. For example, when the lot's chain link fence casted harsh shadows upon

²⁵⁹ Anthony Redpath (photographer) in discussion with the author, February 20, 2020.

²⁶⁰ "What is the Difference Between Hard Light and Soft Light in Photography? Learn How to Create Both Hard Light and Soft Light," Masterclass, August 23, 2019, <https://www.masterclass.com/articles/what-is-the-difference-between-hard-light-and-soft-light-in-photography#what-is-hard-light>.

the subject, they countered this issue by first blocking out all sunlight and illuminating the scene using strobe lighting – an extremely powerful light source which allows for the photographer to place the light further away from the subject.²⁶¹ As a result, the camera set-up methods of illumination facilitated the greatest possible control in addition to brightening the subjects and creating a high contrast. In combination, these techniques foster the process of capturing high-resolution images.

At first glance, the images in the series appear to be products of macrophotography (i.e.: extreme close-up photography of small subjects and living organisms); however, the processes involved in macrophotography are not often utilized when the aim is to produce large-scale, high-resolution prints. Instead, Dadson required a special process of layering what is referred to as focus plates, or image plates captured strictly for focus; image plates refer to the individual photographs that will eventually be layered in Photoshop to comprise the “hero image” or the finalized master document. In my view, image and focus plates come together similarly to how individual brushstrokes eventually form a painting when layered strategically. In order to capture the outmost detail and definition in *Black Medic and Foxtail Barley (Medicago lupulina and Hordeum jubatum) Pink*, the photographer first divided the composition into four equal quadrants (upper left, upper right, lower left, and lower right). Depending on the type of plant being photographed – for example, the species Foxtail Barley is on the taller side – the number of focus plates required may differ because the aim of this process is to capture the plants from tip to root incrementally so as to attain the greatest depth of detail. In *Red Clover (Trifolium pratense) Blue*, the clovers are only about 5 inches tall (from root to blossom), so the

²⁶¹ “What Are Strobe Lights in Photography? Strobe vs. Speedlights,” Masterclass, November 21, 2019, <https://www.masterclass.com/articles/what-are-strobe-lights-in-photography#speedlights-vs-strobes>.

photographer took 20 focus plates capturing the depth in quarter-inch increments. In other words, if the scene is divided into four quadrants, each comprised of twenty focus plates, one master document is made up of approximately 80 focus plates.

Editing is another key component to the overall photographic process. After the focus plates are captured, they are brought into Photoshop to be layered and “stitched” together. “Stitching” refers to the process of layering image plates and modifying them until the grouping appears cohesive, as if it were taken in one shot. The benefit of using this process of layering focus plates is they guarantee that every leaf, stem, and plant fiber will be crisp and in focus. Especially when producing the image on such a large scale, this photographic technique is crucial to ensuring the image’s resolution is consistent throughout. Figs 18 and 19 are of iPhone photographs I took of the painted section of plants that eventually became *Black Medic and Foxtail Barley (Medicago lupulina and Hordeum jubatum) Pink*. When comparing the iPhone images with Dadson’s, the differences in lighting, contrast, perspective, depth and dimension, colour saturation, and resolution are significant. Figs 20-23 are of tight-cropped detail shots of *Black Medic and Foxtail Barley (Medicago lupulina and Hordeum jubatum) Pink* (20-21) and *Red Clover (Trifolium pratense) Blue* (22-23). These cropped detail shots provide the best possible proof of the success, so to speak, of the advanced photographic process. The photographer has stated that the colour was only enhanced slightly in post-production,²⁶² which suggests to me that the camera and lighting technologies themselves have significantly contribute to the resulting image, and not just in terms of resolution, but also to colour hue and consistency. This is where nonhuman photography comes into play; it is only *through* the agentic capacity of the technological apparatus that the pigment of the biodegradable paint and intricate fibers of

²⁶² Anthony Redpath (photographer) in discussion with the author, February 20, 2020.

each stem and leaf can be presented at this monumentalizing scale at with this level of vibrancy and illumination.

Naturally, it is difficult to recognize the potency of these large-scale images without experiencing them in their full capacity. The detail shots I contributed (figs 20-23) can only provide so much information; in person, that detail is presented at a larger-than-life scale, one that requires the viewer's body to mobilize in order to observe every inch. Not only that, the picture plane is so vertical that it almost appears as if the viewer could take one step forward and themselves enter into the jungle terrain of weeds. In his famous work *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth-Century Art* (1972), art historian and critic Leo Steinberg surveys a brief history of the picture plane from the Renaissance to present his renowned notion of the "flatbed picture plane" based on the work of mid-20th-century artists Robert Rauschenberg (and Jean Dubuffet). Steinberg observes that from the work of the "Old Masters" through to Cubism and Abstract Expressionism, the motivation of conceiving the picture plane was maintained: it was to "represen[t] a world, some sort of the worldspace" that directly "corresponde[d] with the erect human posture" where the top of the canvas is proportional to our heads and the bottom, to our feet.²⁶³ He states that "verticality" was – and still is, for the most part – the surviving quality of pictures even when style and content shifted dramatically.²⁶⁴ Even Pollock, whose work was produced in its initial stages by dripping paint upon a canvas laid on the floor, Steinberg states that the subsequent step in his process was to place the canvas vertically on the wall before proceeding.²⁶⁵ Around 1950, Steinberg noticed a significant shift in the angulation of the picture

²⁶³ Leo Steinberg, "Reflections on the State of Criticism," *Artforum* 10, no. 7 (March 1972): 1.

²⁶⁴ Steinberg, "Reflections on the State of Criticism," 1.

²⁶⁵ Steinberg, "Reflections on the State of Criticism," 1.

plane, particularly through the work of Rauschenberg, despite its ability to be hung vertically on the wall.

What differed in the work of Rauschenberg, Steinberg argues, is that his pictures no longer “simulate[d] vertical fields, but opaque flatbed horizontals,” making a “symbolic allusion to hard surfaces such as tabletops, studio floors, charts, bulletin boards.”²⁶⁶ Steinberg stresses that it is not the picture’s final orientation (on a wall) that is significant here, but rather the “psychic address of the image, its spatial mode of imaginative confrontation.”²⁶⁷ This shift to a horizontal angulation was not necessarily a new phenomenon, however, with the 1950s’ move towards “man-sized environmental scale[s],” this shift was equally sizable.²⁶⁸ In the late 1950s and into 1960, Rauschenberg rather playfully explored with three-dimensional objects that he would suspend, hanging either from the canvas or attached beside, between, or below the canvas; these objects often suggested horizontality such as the pedestrian instruments of everyday life.²⁶⁹ For example, in 1955, Rauschenberg took his own bed and applied various colours of paint messily onto the pillow and bedspread and called it, simply, *Bed*; once hung vertically, the work maintains its horizontal angulation through illusionary suggestion.²⁷⁰ Steinberg recalls that Jasper Johns once remarked on what he considered to be Rauschenberg’s most pivotal contribution to art which was: “a pictorial surface that let the world in again.”²⁷¹ Steinberg suggests that the distinguishing feature of a flatbed picture plane is also one that evokes a renewal: Rauschenberg’s pictorial plane he says “does not evoke a prior optical event,” stating that this development was not simply about aesthetics, but it was also about the relationship between

²⁶⁶ Steinberg, “Reflections on the State of Criticism,” 1.

²⁶⁷ Steinberg, “Reflections on the State of Criticism,” 2.

²⁶⁸ Steinberg, “Reflections on the State of Criticism,” 2.

²⁶⁹ Steinberg, “Reflections on the State of Criticism,” 3.

²⁷⁰ Steinberg, “Reflections on the State of Criticism,” 4.

²⁷¹ Steinberg, “Reflections on the State of Criticism,” 4.

artist and viewer, and image and viewer.²⁷² The picture plane is an element in Dadson's work that significantly affects the experience of the viewer insofar as its verticality is so severe that it works to almost suck the viewer into the intertwined forest of weeds, inviting us to walk on its horizontal ground.

As humans ordinarily encounter weeds from above (e.g. weeds are present within our gardens, through cracks in the pavement, and sporadically in our lawns), rarely are we confronted by weeds to the extent of what Dadson's images present. Mirzoeff claims that the right to look is "not about seeing" but rather, it "begins at a personal level with the look into someone else's eyes to express friendship, solidarity, or love."²⁷³ He states that the right to look must be "mutual" and it must "claim autonomy, not individualism or voyeurism."²⁷⁴ I argue that, based off Mizoeff's assessment, Dadson's images are a countervisuality that place weeds in a position that not only opposes autocratic authority, but also in a posture that creates an illusionary, forward-moving pull that ultimately invites the spectator to enter the field of weeds. This illusion is possible *only* through the layers of focus plates that facilitate a greater depth of resolution so even that the plant fibers in behind the thicket are visible and drawing the spectator forward. As opposed to surveillance devices and aerial photography that places the viewer in a position far from the subject, Dadson's nonhuman photography brings us closer, so close that we are almost able (at least, we can imagine ourselves being able to) walk forward and enter the picture plane, walk on the horizontal ground and brush against the soft, spindly fibers, and breathe the same oxygen that is maintaining weed life. So, what does it mean to enter a realm of weeds? Perhaps it suggests, after Haraway, a *Chthulucene* lifestyle, where we coexist with

²⁷² Leo Steinberg, "Reflections on the State of Criticism," *Artforum* 10, no. 7 (March 1972): 4.

²⁷³ Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look*, 1.

²⁷⁴ Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look*, 1.

tentacular entities and embrace the historically and traditionally condemned creatures that walk, slither, or grow through this earth. At the very least, Dadson's images – produced through advanced nonhuman photography – decenter the human, bringing weeds, dynamic contributors to the sustainability of our planet, into the forefront and beyond.

CONCLUSION

This thesis has argued that Andrew Dadson's 2019 series of photographs proposes a countervisuality that deconstructs the discriminating visualization of weeds that has been socially and linguistically perpetuated from the 18th century to the present. By virtue of specific artistic strategies, Dadson's series, particularly the works *Black Medic and Foxtail Barley* (*Medicago lupulina* and *Hordeum jubatum*) *Pink and Red Clover* (*Trifolium pratense*) *Blue*, legitimize and monumentalize weeds, allowing them to be recognized as significant contributors to the sustainability of our planet. I supported this central claim by using three axes of investigation. In chapter one, I began by presenting a historical overview of the concept of the weed, followed by establishing the qualities that make weeds pertinent contributors to our environment at large. My second chapter looked at Dadson's artistic strategy of developing a "quasi-record" of weeds – between documentary and artifice – a posture that challenges the predominantly discursive visuality of weeds. Finally, chapter three focused on the advanced photographic processes used in the making of Dadson's series to argue for the enlivening, creative potential in the technological apparatus and its function, making weeds hyper-detailed and presented at a large and interrogating scale. Together, my three chapters make a claim for Dadson's series of photographs as a countervisuality of weeds.

Dadson's series is one contribution to the corpus of artists working to address weeds in the 21st century. One example is American artist Tony Matelli's (b. 1971) series of life-like weed

sculptures that are cast in bronze and coated in vinyl paint; when placed in the gallery, his sculptures look as though they are snaking their way through the corner that connects the floor with the ceiling; Matelli initially pursued weeds as a response to feeling like an outsider upon moving to New York, thus weeds, for him, symbolize and celebrate his own feelings of abandonment and neglect.²⁷⁵ Another artist who was taken by the resilient species growing within urban spaces is British artist Michael Landy (b. 1963) whose series of etchings feature life-sized “studies” of individual weeds he observed growing in the streets of London, referring to them as “optimistic things” to discover within the city.²⁷⁶ A third example, and one that also involves the relationship between weeds and the urban landscape, is Swiss artist Mona Caron whose weed murals often extend the heights of several-story buildings, presenting what she refers to as “heroic portraits” of weeds.²⁷⁷ What the aforementioned artists share (Dadson included) is the desire to capture and represent weeds while acknowledging their reputation as plants that have been otherwise discarded and mistreated by humans; and yet, another similarity between the three artists is their tendency to present an individual plant without providing any environmental signifiers, thus disconnecting the plant from the world(s) in which it thrives. This is a quality that Dadson negates by capturing weeds – still rooted – within their natural environments.

The element of *rootedness* is significant insofar as Dadson’s intention was never to disturb the plants (and their hetero-temporalities after Pollan), but rather to bring them into a renewed reality through gentle earth gestures and photography. It really was photography that

²⁷⁵ “Tony Matelli,” Hallmark Art Collection, accessed July 19, 2020, <https://www.hallmarkartcollection.com/artwork/abandon-weed/>.

²⁷⁶ “Michael Landy: Creeping Buttercup,” Tate, accessed July 19, 2020, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/landy-creeping-buttercup-p78730>.

²⁷⁷ “Home,” Mona Caron, accessed July 19, 2020, <https://monacaron.com/>.

became a crucial constituent of this thesis as an artistic strategy that aligns with the historical lineage of land art, but also one that was a necessary instrument in bringing weeds into existence using hyper-resolution images. Connecting Jeff Wall's *near-documentary* with Dadson's "quasi-record" was lucrative in that it reminded me of the affective dimension of his photographs which, to me, lies in their liminal positionality: somewhere between fact and fiction. Photography, also, permitted Dadson's series to participate in the historical tradition of scientific (mechanical) objectivity, where the presentation of natural history was – and is – never truly objective. Finally, it is the nonhuman aspect of photography that became the glue to this thesis in its ability to decenter the human and nurture co-created relationships between artist and machine and between machine and plant.

To extend this research to include projects other than Dadson's, it would be valuable to look at Indigenous contributions to the remediation of native plants that have been historically recast as weeds. An example of this is *A Constellation of Remediation* (2019), a decolonial artistic project between Indigenous ethnobotanist T'uy't'tanat Cease Wyss and multidisciplinary artist Anne Riley. This project involves the planting of Indigenous gardens of native pollinators on vacant and untended lots within the city of Vancouver – the unceded lands of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), and səlilwətał (Tsleil-Waututh) nations. Connecting this and other decolonial projects involving native and foreign plants with Dadson's series could be a productive way to consider the notion of the *local*. For now, I have presented an original body of research, addressing Dadson in an entirely new way: while his works are often approached through an ecological lens, I have added to and interrogated that conversation by introducing the nonhuman agentic capacities of his photographic process as a mode of reportage and a method to decenter the human while enlivening nature.

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Images



Fig. 1: Andrew Dadson, *Black Medic and Foxtail Barley (Medicago lupulina and Hordeum jubatum) Pink*, 2019, wild clover, barley, milk paint (water, casein, chalk, limestone, earth pigments, cochineal), inkjet print mounted on Di-bond. 150 x 190 cm (framed). Courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 2: *Red Clover (Trifolium pratense) Blue*, 2019, wild clover, milk paint (water, casein, chalk, limestone, earth pigments), inkjet print mounted on Di-bond. 184 x 134 cm (framed). Courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 3: Andrew Dadson, *Black Painted Lawn with White Fence*, 2006. Lightjet print. 146 x 183 cm (unframed). Courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 4: Andrew Dadson, *Black Yard*, 2007. Lightjet print. 213 x 127 cm (unframed). Courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 5: Andrew Dadson, *Black Hill*, 2014. Inkjet print. 187 x 150 cm (unframed). Courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 6: The empty lot located at the 2950 block of West 4th Avenue in Vancouver, BC. iPhone image courtesy of Tobin Gibson, the director of Unit 17.



Fig. 7: Jeff Wall, *Landscape Manual*, 1969, publication. Collection of the Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery Archives, Vancouver.



Fig. 8: Jeff Wall, *The Destroyed Room*, 1978, transparency in lightbox. 159 x 229.0 cm.
Courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 9: Eugène Delacroix, *Death of Sardanapalus*, 1827, oil on canvas. 392 x 496 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris.



Fig. 10: Jeff Wall, *Mimic*, 1982, transparency in lightbox, 198 x 228.6 cm. Courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 11: Richard Long, *A Snowball Track*, 1964. © Richard Long / SOCAN (2020).



Fig. 12: Richard Long, *A Line Made by Walking*, 1967, photography (gelatin silver print on paper with graphite on board). 82.5 x 112.5 cm. © Richard Long / SOCAN (2020).



Fig. 13: Andy Goldsworthy, *Rowan leaves laid around a hole*, Yorkshire Sculpture Park, 1987, chromogenic print mounted. 76 x 74.5 cm. © Andy Goldsworthy / SOCAN (2020).



Fig. 14: Andy Goldsworthy, *Red leaves on cracked earth*, 2006, chromogenic print.
25.9 x 25.9 cm. © Andy Goldsworthy / SOCAN (2020).



Fig. 15. The locations within the lot where the painted landscapes occurred. The pinkish spot at top of the photograph is *Black Medic and Foxtail Barley* (*Medicago lupulina* and *Hordeum jubatum*) Pink. iPhone image and image-editing courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 16: The locations within the lot where the painted landscapes occurred. The blue spot on the right side of the photograph is *Red Clover (Trifolium pratense) Blue*. iPhone image and image-editing courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 17: Jeff Wall, *A Sudden Gust of Wind (after Hokusai)*, 1993, transparency in lightbox, 229.0 x 377.0 cm. Courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 18: Image of *Black Medic* and *Foxtail Barley* (*Medicago lupulina* and *Hordeum jubatum*)
Pink. iPhone image courtesy of the author.



Fig. 19: Image of *Black Medic and Foxtail Barley* (*Medicago lupulina* and *Hordeum jubatum*)
Pink. iPhone image detail courtesy of the author.

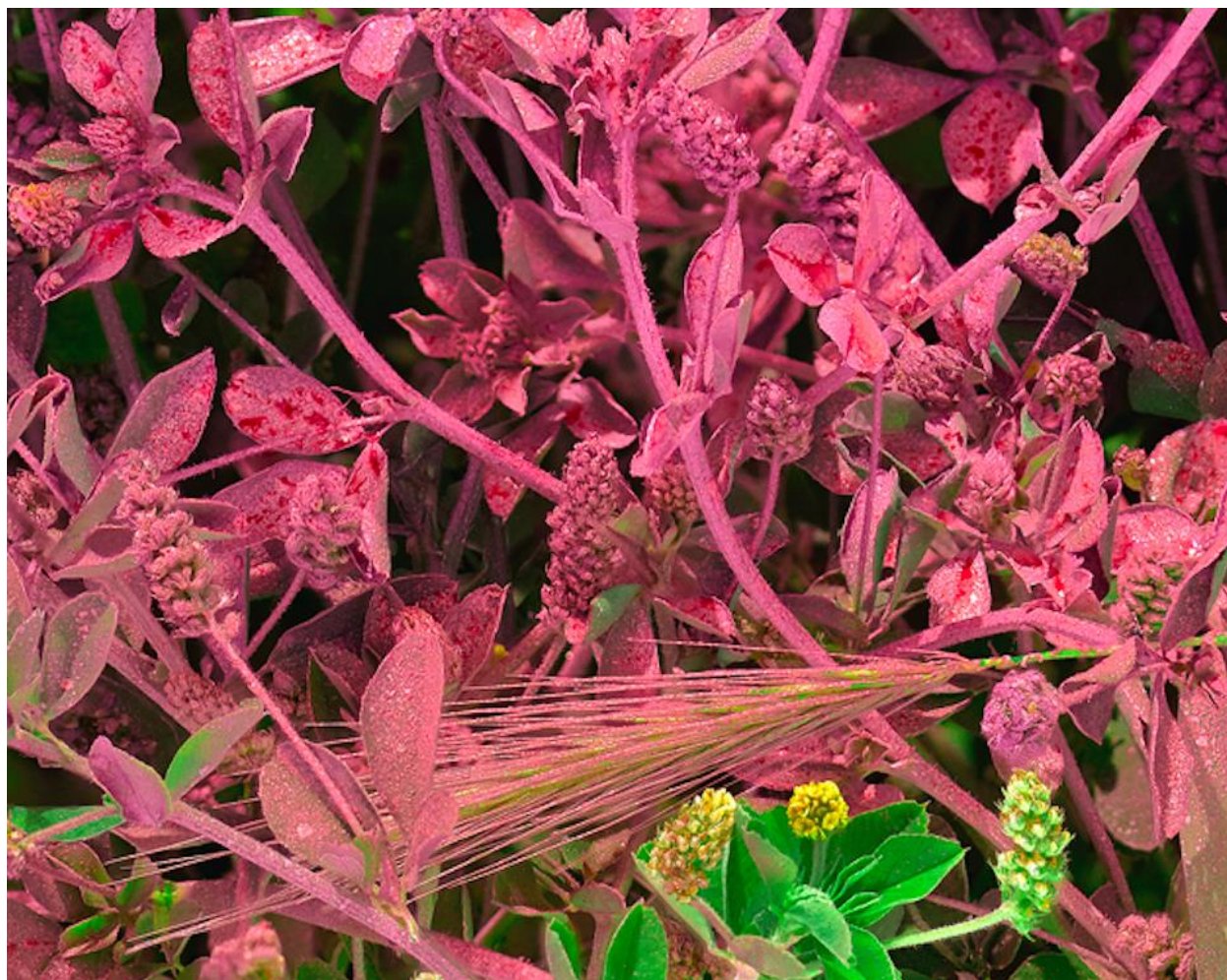


Fig. 20: Andrew Dadson, *Black Medic and Foxtail Barley (Medicago lupulina and Hordeum jubatum) Pink* (detail), 2019, wild clover, barley, milk paint (water, casein, chalk, limestone, earth pigments, cochineal), inkjet print mounted on Di-bond. 150 x 190 cm (framed). Courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 21: Andrew Dadson, *Black Medic and Foxtail Barley (Medicago lupulina and Hordeum jubatum) Pink* (detail), 2019, wild clover, barley, milk paint (water, casein, chalk, limestone, earth pigments, cochineal), inkjet print mounted on Di-bond. 150 x 190 cm (framed). Courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 22: *Red Clover (Trifolium pratense) Blue* (detail), 2019, wild clover, milk paint (water, casein, chalk, limestone, earth pigments), inkjet print mounted on Di-bond. 184 x 134cm (framed). Courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 23: *Red Clover (Trifolium pratense) Blue* (detail), 2019, wild clover, milk paint (water, casein, chalk, limestone, earth pigments), inkjet print mounted on Di-bond. 184 x 134cm (framed). Courtesy of the artist.