

# *light is the medium*

Paper by Lloyd Godman

*Beyond the Revolution, Text, Image, Sound*

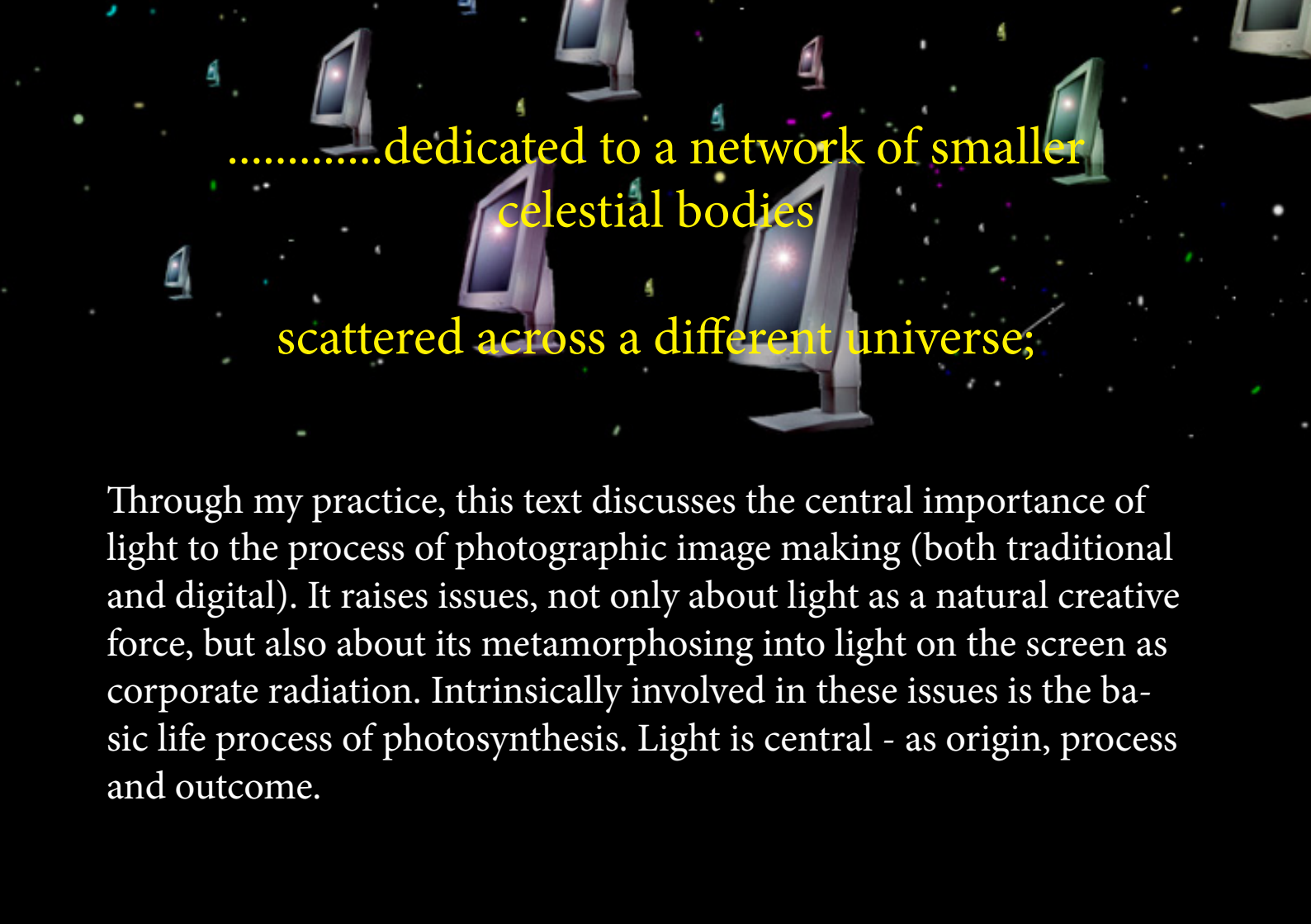
School of Creative Media RMIT University Melbourne, Australia.  
Referred conference



*light is the medium*

*I saw Eternity the other night  
Like a great Ring of pure and endless light  
All calm, as it was bright,  
And beneath it, Time in hours, days, years  
Driv'n by the spheres  
Like a vast shadow mov'd, In which the world  
And all her train were hurl'd*

(Henry Vaughn, 1650)



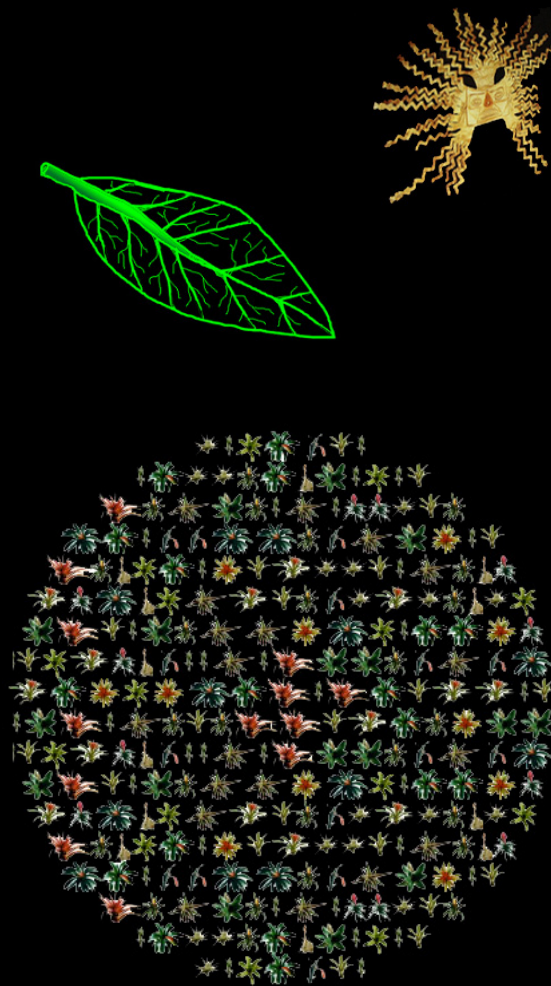
.....dedicated to a network of smaller  
celestial bodies

scattered across a different universe;

Through my practice, this text discusses the central importance of light to the process of photographic image making (both traditional and digital). It raises issues, not only about light as a natural creative force, but also about its metamorphosing into light on the screen as corporate radiation. Intrinsicly involved in these issues is the basic life process of photosynthesis. Light is central - as origin, process and outcome.

As our ancestors once stood and worshipped the light of the sun, now we stare, entranced, devoted believers, dedicated to a network of smaller celestial bodies scattered across a different universe, introverted pinpricks of light, in the void of cyberspace. Light is central to sight, and as such is essential to all the visual arts. Far back in prehistoric times, the power of light from the sun was recognized as the center of the life cycle and became an integral part of ritual and image culture, became a central icon that crossed generations and race, became the centre of myth and religion.

The Greeks, Empedocles, Leucippus and Democritus were among the first to contribute documented theories on light; the fascination to explain the phenomenon and its meaning have remained for centuries. Without doubt, electromagnetic radiation (Light) is essential to sustaining life on the planet Earth, and the ability of plants to photosynthesize is a crucial factor in the transference of this energy. Archimedes first noted aspects of the pigmentation change in plant tissue due to sunlight exposure, and since then photosynthesis has been central to much speculative and scientific investigation.



Light.... is essential to sustaining life on the planet earth....

.....metamorphosis on the screen as corporate radiation ( advertising) and indirectly drives the global machine of consumerism.....



At the birth of photography, again, it was light that became the activating force in the photographic experiments of Niepece, Fox Talbot, Daguerre and Bayard. This eccentric phenomena, light, remains the essence of all photographic processes, and the new direction of digital photography is no different. Sophisticated image manipulation with Photoshop relies light from the digital universe. But it is ironic that light the giver of life has also become the medium which metamorphoses on the screen as advertising or corporate radiation and indirectly drives the global machine of consumerism, a consumerism dependant on growth, but a growth that places proportional more demands on the diversity and abundance of flora and funa on the planet, the very eocsystem that is the boiler house and drives life on the planet.

During an arts expedition that involved 11 other artists, to the Subantarctic Islands in 1989 it became obvious to me that the detritus of our existence thrown into the ocean never disappears. Strewn on along the coast line of these Pristine islands ( Adams Island which is the Southern most Island of the Group is the largest island in the world with no Introduced animals or plants) was rubbish and detritus dating from the present to almost the very discovery of the islands. While a museum curator asked us to collect any artifacts we might find, Department of Conservation asked us to collect the hazardous rubbish. When we queried them where the distinction



lay between rubbish and artifact they could not answer. We duly collected the rubbish and on our return voyage aboard a Naval frigate, the collected rubbish was dumped back into the ocean along with the Frigates new garbage. From this experience I developed a large series of photograph / photogram works under the title Codes of Survival, that referenced both the island and the detritus.

The central image was a photograph of the environment, while it was framed with a boarder of photograms; objects referencing the discarded. Until the 1920s, many artists produced representations of light, photographs of objects in front of their camera, but from the 1920s there was a distinct difference: Man Ray, Moholy Nagy, El Lissitzky, Len Lye and others initiated contemporary investigations into light itself as a valid medium for art making, an investigation which has continued in various forms through the century to the present day by artists like Christian Boltanski, Ralph Hotere. The photogram is a part of these experiments. From the Codes of Survival project, I worked on a second project combining photograms and photographs called Adze to Coda, which investigated the relationship between tools and and environment. It ranged from stone tools to binary codes.



Image from - *Codes of Survival*

Image from *Adze to Coda*



detail of Male figure photogram - *Evidence from the Religion of Technology* - Lloyd Godman 1994



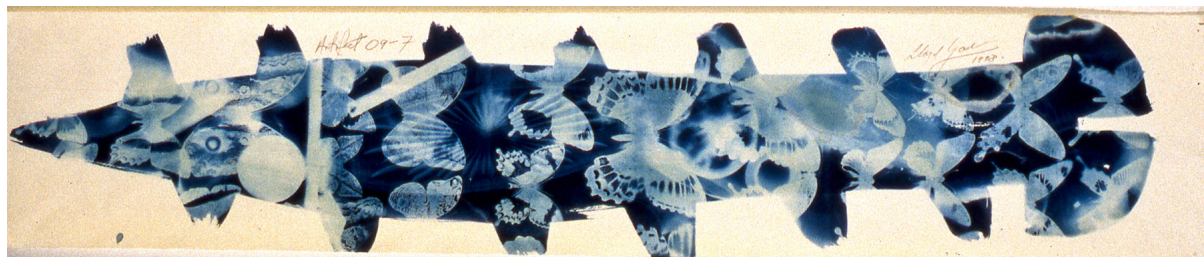
In 1993, I became intensely interested in the photogram as a means of creating images. I experimented with colour photograms again utilizing objects as artifacts and detritus, but investigating the limited band of circumstances that sustains life on the planet. The green part of the spectrum where life is sustained, through to the violet areas where it perishes. I became interested not only in the objects we discard, but the chemicals we inventively and deliberately discard into the environment. The work finally evolved into a major installation more than 22 meters long with three interlocking cruciforms, a female figure, a male figure, and that of a skeleton, under the title Evidence from the Religion of Technology.

Large Color Photogram works - 56 Ctype photogram prints - 400x500 each (Total dimension of work 22m x 2.4m)



*Artifiction Installation*, Forrester Gallery, Oamaru, New Zealand 1998

This interest in chemical pollution led to another series titled *Aporian Emulsions*. Around 1996, there was an intense period of exploration exploring the first photographic processes which referenced Fox Talbot's photograms through hand-made emulsions like the Cyanotype and Van Dyke Brown where I began with base chemicals to make the concoctions which formed the images. While still focusing on artifacts and detritus, the alchemy of chemical concoctions we inadvertently release into our soil, waters and atmosphere became an intrinsic aspect of the work. Although there was a large series of individual prints associated with the project, it also cumulated in large installation works as an amalgam of the individual prints.

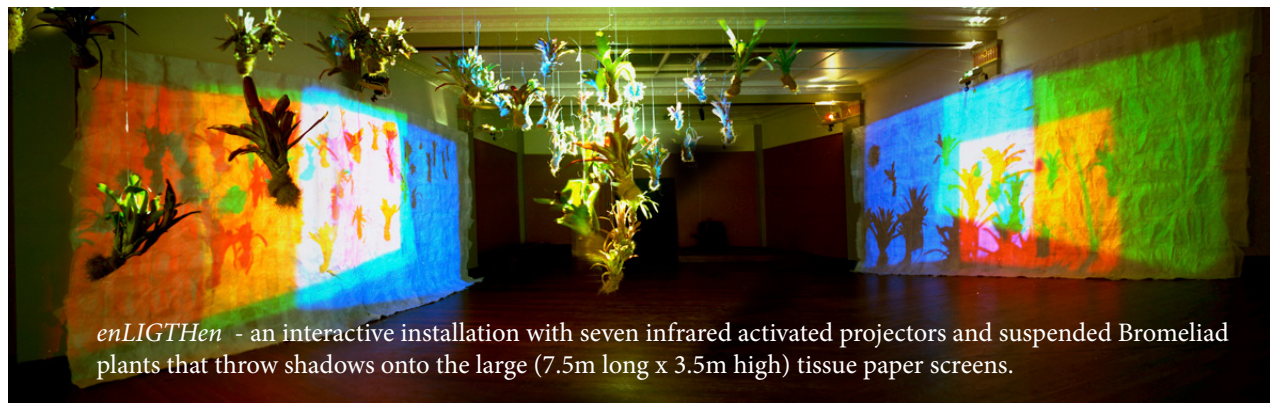


*Artifact 09 -7* - 1996 - Cyanotype photograph - 840 x 600

During 1998 I began an MFA, with the project based on the conceptual amalgamation of two long-held personal activities that imply light: \*the process of growing plants (which I had engaged in since 1973, but previously only as a botanical endeavor) \*and that of photography. (Which has been central to my work since 1974) I began using the process of photosynthesis as photography to create images on the leaves of plants by masking off designated areas for months at a time. I specifically worked with Bromeliad plants which are epiphytes, and the contradiction of the parasite became implicated in the work. Gradually the work evolved into a major projection installation. The plants were suspended from the ceiling of the gallery; large tissue paper screens were made to and hang on three sides of the space.



*Various Alchemic symbols* - 1996 - on Neoregelia plant



*enLIGHTen* - an interactive installation with seven infrared-activated projectors and suspended Bromeliad plants that throw shadows onto the large (7.5m long x 3.5m high) tissue paper screens.



Six infrared activated projectors, 2 with green filters, 2 with red filters and 2 with blue filters; were positioned to project across the gallery, through the plants and throw shadows onto the tissue screens at each side. As the audience entered the darkened space, the projectors began to turn on for a set period of time before turning off again. There was no designated sequence with the projectors turning on and off in relationship to the number of people in the space their path through the space. Of course where the projections overlapped a complimentary set of shadows was created in cyan, yellow and magenta. A seventh projector with no filter, which was also infrared activated, was positioned to project light down the centre of the gallery through the plants and casts shadows on the end wall. But the plants had been specifically arranged so as to create the cryptic letters LIGHT as a shadow on the screen. Critics described the work as an Enchanted forest. S

ilver, like the cells of a plant, grow during the process of development and in 2001 I engaged in experiments that led to a projection installation where the shadow of a plant was projected onto a piece of

photographic paper. Gradually over the period of the exhibition, and only through the action of light, a vague image of the plant developed on the paper. The projector was again linked to an infrared sensor but this time it turned the projector off the when anyone stepped forward to view the work, which allowed them to view the transition from projected image to a negative image developing on the paper. But over an extended period over exposure began to solarize the image and transformed it to a positive.

In November this year I am planning to install a larger version of the work in the Blue Oyster Gallery in Dunedin, but in this work, the light source which forms the images will emanate from the static screens of television monitors.

So, while we pursue the expanding frontier of the digital galaxy, we should never forget light, the phenomena that haunted the inventors, that inspired the innovators of the medium, we should never forget the phenomena that drives life in all its diverse forms on the planet. With more people living in the past 10 years on the planet than in all recorded history added together, should we ask the question, “does the world need another artist, or do I as a person need art as a

creative process as part of my life? Do I as an organic life form need light? But My interest in the theme for this project came from the conceptual amalgamation of two long held personal activities that employ light:

\*the process of growing plants (which I had engaged in since 1973, but previously only as a botanical endeavor) \*and that of photography. (Which has been central to my work since 1974)

As our ancestors once stood and worshipped the light of the sun, now we stare, entranced, devoted believers, dedicated to a network of smaller celestial bodies scattered across a different universe.

