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Bhopal- Blueprint- Endplan

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I first started to research in Madhya Pradesh with industrial workers in Asia's largest viscose rayon plant. Bhopal, the site of the world's worst industrial disaster lies in the same state and the disaster happened in 1984 shortly after I had spent 15 months conducting my own factory-based research.

We will eventually return to Bhopal in central India, scene of the world's worst industrial disaster. But first we detour via Calcutta and China. Calcutta was the financial centre of the East India Company's opium trade to China. The contemporary Danish photographer Joachim Koester has described his 'futile search' for evidence of this, frustrated by the deliberate omission of a key historical moment and has used photography as a portal to 'forgotten memories' echoing Thomas De Quincey's description of opium's own 'marvellous agency' and its ability to open up 'secret inscriptions'.

In his beautiful text, *Nanking Restaurant: Tracing Opium in Calcutta, 2006*, Koester describes a visit to Calcutta in search of signs of this world-transforming trade. Opium, grown in the Ganges delta was consolidated in Calcutta and then shipped globally by the East India Company. In 1830 opium contributed one sixth of the gross national product of British India and between 1839 and 1842 and 1856 and 1860 the Company would fight two wars in China to secure its markets for it needed to sell opium to finance its purchases of tea. Let me underline that date, the first Opium war started in 1839 the date of the announcement of photography in Europe. Calcutta was



the great Narcopolis and it was in the City of Opium, the City of Dreadful Night Koester searched. But in vain: he visits an exhibition at the Victoria Memorial hoping, as he says, ‘to find drawings, photographs, or descriptions of the parts of town associated with the business’. But he finds nothing. His search is futile, the traces have been – it seems – too deeply buried, the archive of this shame too profoundly ruined.

A film-maker introduces Koester to a Sumit Roy, former denizen of Fung’s opium den in the 1980s in Calcutta’s old Chinatown. Koester tracks the address given by Roy and finds a sole surviving building which he is able to survey from the roof of a neighboring building. From this vantage point, he writes the house ‘was even more reminiscent of an exposed layer from a distant past’. He ruminates on the number of black crows circling the building before then suddenly apprehending a sign ‘written in chiselled, weatherworn letters’ that declares NANKING RESTAURANT. Nanking as in the Nanking Treaty signed in 1842 at the end of the first opium war.

Koester’s camera seemed to align itself with the ‘marvelous power of opium’, with De Quincey’s understanding of opium’s ability to open a portal onto the ‘secret inscriptions of the mind’, to permit ‘journeys in time to forgotten memories’, a ‘mining of consciousness’. Photography, like

opium, seemed to (as Koester writes) ‘push to the surface events that had been spirited away’.

Just as De Quincey saw the brain as a palimpsest ‘a membrane or scroll with innumerable layers of script’ so photography too seemed able to access what Walter Benjamin termed the optical consciousness where ‘nothing is erased completely’. ‘Everything’, Koester concludes, ‘is there, even if it is concealed. The bottom layers can be excavated by applying the right “chemical”, and seemingly lost incidents are retrieved.’ Just as psychoanalysis permits us access to the instinctual unconscious, so photography – when it follows what is truly ‘native’ to it (as Benjamin put it), allows us to discover the optical unconscious around which swirl practices of prophecy and divination. De Quincey insisted that it was magical opium (and ‘its marvelous agency’), and not the opium-eater, who was the hero of his tale, and Koester develops a profound investigation of the magical agency of photography and its narco-chemical ability to recover a past lost to ordinary human vision.

Jeet Thayil’s novel *Narcopolis* describes Bombay as a city which has ‘obliterated its own history by changing its name [to Mumbai] and surgically altering its face’. He is concerned with what he calls ‘night-time tales that vanish in sunlight like vampire dust’ and begins his novel

with the process of intoxication, ‘drawing the opium smoke deep into his lungs, his nostrils’ stitching ‘the blue smoke from pipe to blood to eye to I and out into the blue world’.

This ‘blue world’ delivers us directly to Michael Taussig’s engagement with Indigo. Indigo, like opium was an international colonial trade with India at its centre. Taussig develops a theory akin to De Quincey’s ‘secret inscriptions’ noting how the colonial emporium of colour, of tactility and of stimulants (damask from Damascus, muslin from Mosul, indigo from India) deposits its history discretely: ‘meaningful yet covert enough to find a hiding place in waking dreams’ as Benjamin would say. What is palimpsestically figured by De Quincey as a kind of Arabesque, a set of shifting screens, is for Taussig a corporeal trace: ‘The tongue remembers what you do not’ is how he puts it. ‘Life moves on while all around you lie the traces of lost eras’.

It is time to conjure a photographic blue world that will return us to central India and which speaks to similar questions of trace, temporality and prophecy. The cyanotype process is used in the duplication of engineering and architectural plans: blueprints as they are appropriately called. This was a process invented by John Herschel the astronomer and early photographic enthusiast and father of William J. Herschel who developed a competing indexical system – dactylography – in Bengal during the

midst of the indigo disturbances. And in another of those weird convergences which any serious history compels us to attend to we discover that in 1846 De Quincey presaging Benjamin’s articulation of the optical unconscious would refer to Herschel’s telescope as ‘the ... great tube through which man communicates with the shadowy’.

The Madhya Pradesh Government’s official number of fatalities was 3,787. Other Indian Government agencies have since calculated the total at more than 15,000. Perhaps between 100,000 and 200,000 people still live with gas-related disabilities. The rickshaw driver who drove me to the plant so that I might photograph it was eight on that night – 2nd/3rd December 1984 when 28 tonnes of lethal gas rolled across the centre of Bhopal. He recalled waking with excruciating pain in his eyes and being rushed to a chaotic hospital by relatives. Countless family members still live with the effects of that night.

Tank 610 - containing 42 tons of methyl isocyanate – was rapidly filled by water late on December 2nd, causing the temperature of the tank to rise to more than 200°C.

Union Carbide downplayed the earlier incidents of phosgene leaks (some involving fatalities) in 1981, 1982 and multiple MIC leaks in 1982, 1983 and early 1984. Indian authorities warned of the probability

of a major incident from 1979 onwards. Visiting US experts in 1981 warned Union Carbide of the potential for a 'runaway reaction' in the MIC plant.

The MIC tank alarms had not worked for four years and there was only one manual back-up system as opposed to the four relied on in Union Carbide's US plants. The flare tower and gas scrubber had been inoperable for five months prior to the disaster but in any event the scrubber was designed to handle only one quarter of the pressure which had built up in the tank and the tower one quarter of the volume of gas. Carbon steel valves, which corrode when in contact with acid were used to save money. Water sprays were set too low and could not reach the gas.

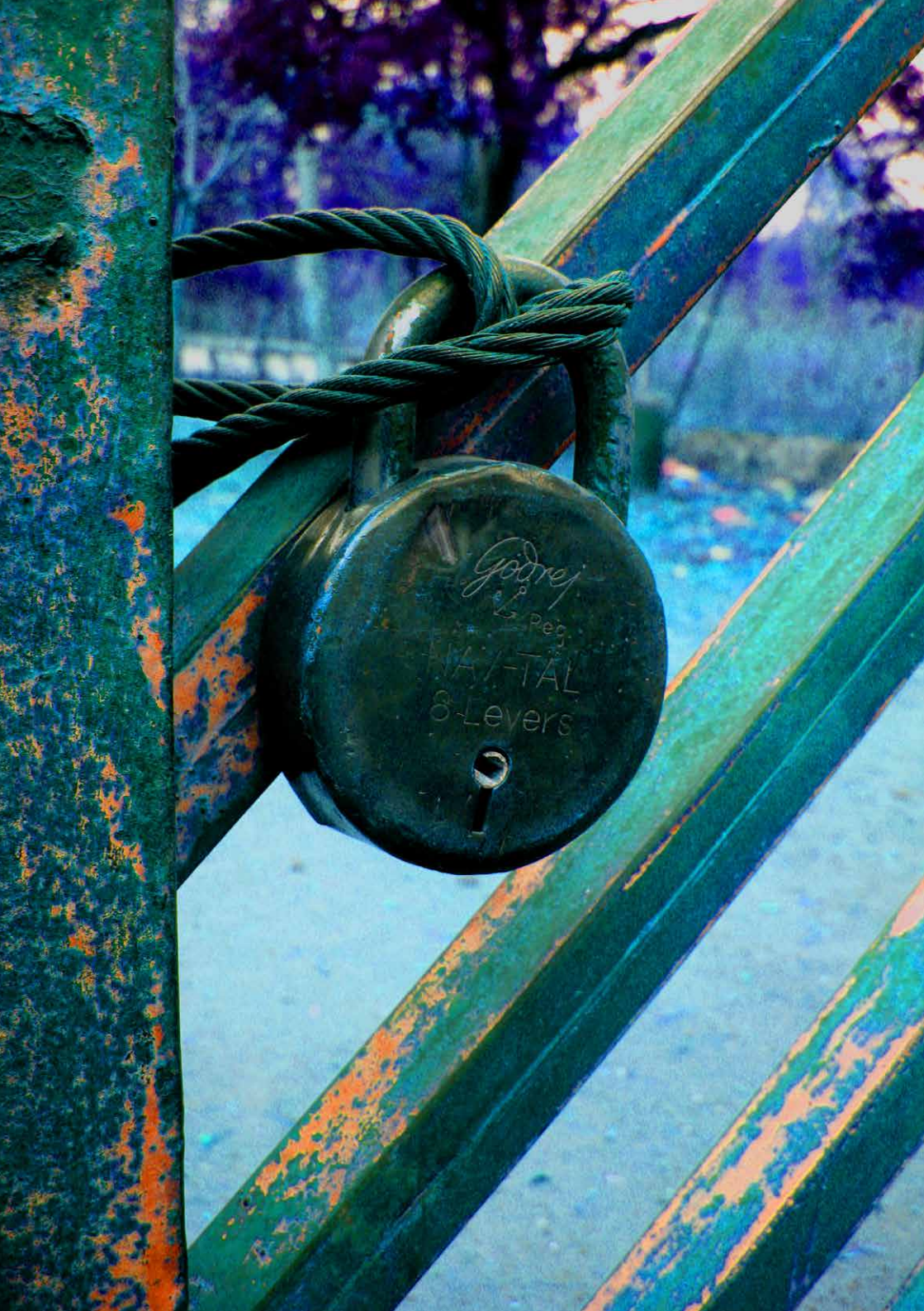
Joachim Koester described making a photograph of a former warehouse used by the East India Company on the banks of the Hooghly River in Calcutta. He describes becoming aware of people passing through the picture space and realizing that only those standing completely still would find a place in the negative. All those in motion would be deleted or leave a foggy and indeterminate trace of their presence. They would, he writes 'appear as small holes in the time-space continuum, something that could point to even larger holes in our perception – a connection to the possibility of traveling backwards or forwards in time, that drugs like opium have unlocked'. These foggy presences may recall Daguerre's *Boulevard de*

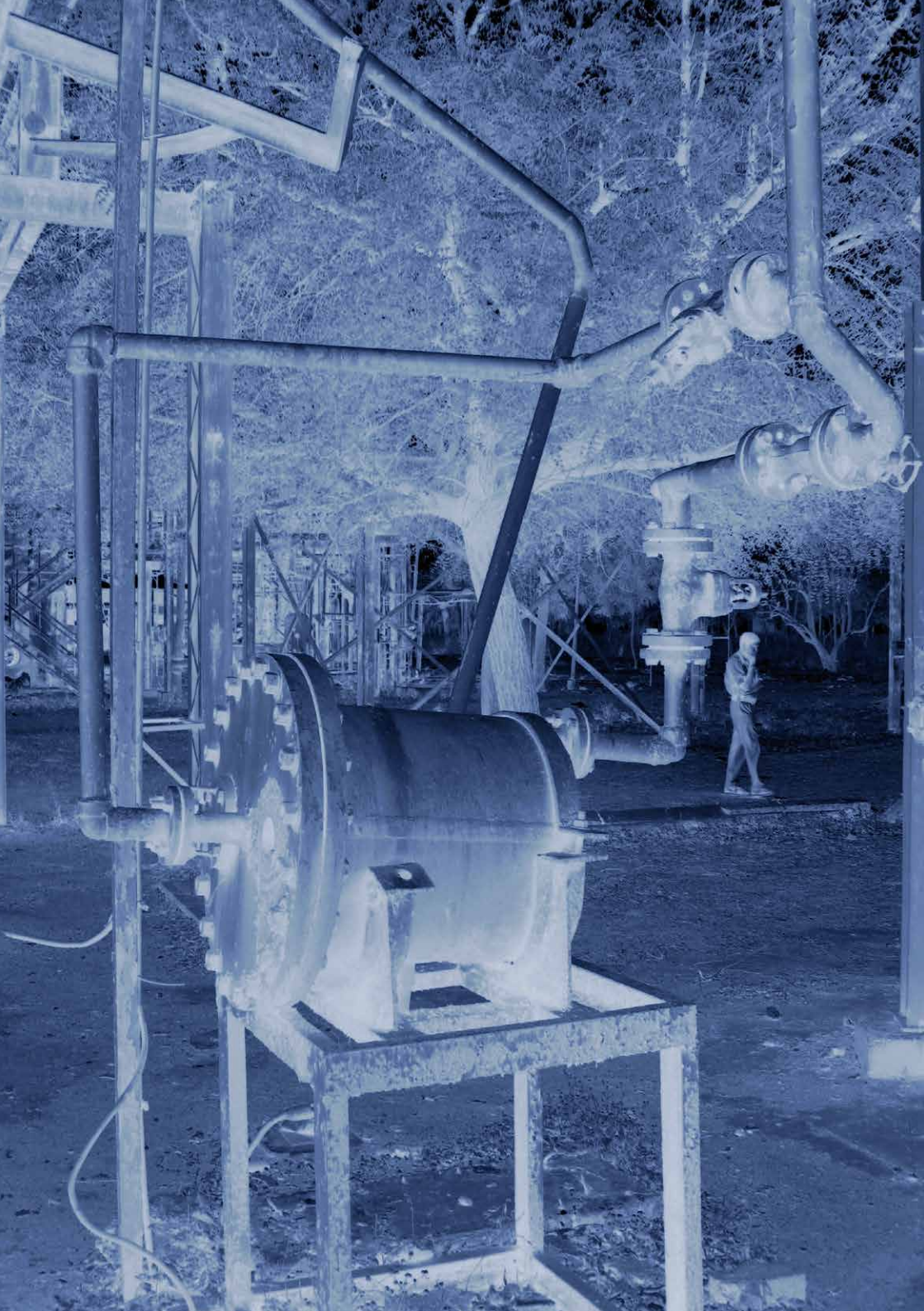
Temple made in 1838, one year before the first opium war began. Benjamin, I think, had something similar in mind when he wrote in *Theses on the Philosophy of History* about 'chips of messianic time... blasted from the continuum of history'.

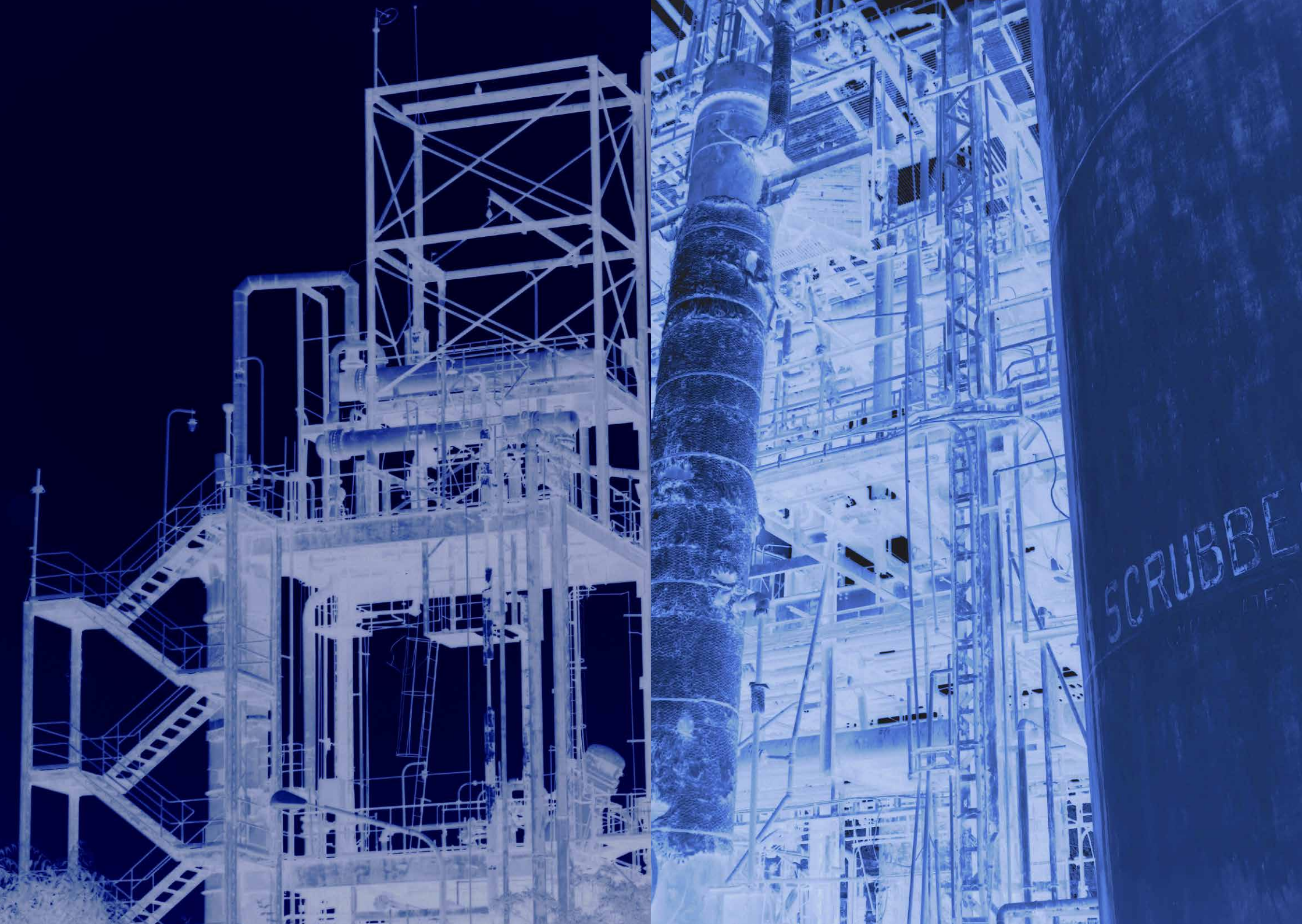
Seeing blue, perhaps allows us in a similar manner to travel backwards and forwards in time. The US parent company (Union Carbide) argued that the disaster was a Badiouan 'event' or 'rupture', without precedent, not easily anticipated and certainly not planned. But perhaps it had more the quality of an 'endplan', a destiny born of contempt for the poor, distant, and unknown - an outcome written in the blueprints, recoverable after the event through these digital images.

Seeing blue allows us access, via photography, to the doubled time that Roland Barthes grasped when he captioned an image of Lewis Payne by Alexander Gardner (who was to be executed soon after the photograph had been made) 'He is dead *and* he is going to die – I shudder over a catastrophe that has already happened'. Seeing blue, through photography, allows us access to the endplan, evidence recoverable after the event and which reveals the event to be immanent in the blueprint.













PHOSGENE TANK



Citizens of Photography: the Camera and the Political Imagination

The PhotoDemos project is an empirical anthropological investigation into the relationship between “representation” through everyday images and “representation” through politics.

The PhotoDemos Collective is a group of six researchers.

The names of the researchers and the countries in which they researched are:

Naluwembe Binaisa (Nigeria)
Vindhya Buthpitiya (Sri Lanka)
Konstantinos Kalantzis (Greece)
Christopher Pinney (Bangladesh, India, and Nepal)
Ileana L. Selejan (Nicaragua)
Sokphea Young (Cambodia)

The project is based in the Department of Anthropology at UCL and is funded by a European Research Council Advanced Grant no. 695283.

More information on <https://citizensofphotography.org>

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