

*An Interview with Camille Perry – Collective Agitation* by Mia Palmer-Verevis

We respectfully acknowledge that this interview took place on the lands of the Wurundjeri and Boon Wurrung peoples who have been practicing art for over 60,000 years. Sovereignty was never ceded.

Camille Perry is a lens-based artist who practices on the lands of Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation. Perry is a founding member of 'Collective Agitation', an artist collective that unpacks the potential for sustainable, alternative photography developing. I met with the artist to discuss Collective Agitation's upcoming exhibition, 'Fossilised Sunshine', showing at Blindside from September 13 to October 7, 2023, as part of the Collective Polyphony Festival. collaborating with the London Alternative Photography Collective.

MPV: How was Collective Agitation formed? How do you work together?

CP: It's actually a really funny story; it kind of came out of nowhere. Last year, after just finishing uni, a teacher had suggested that I apply for this teaching workshop in Ghent, Belgium, that considered the blind spots in higher education photography. They required three people to teach it together, so I was looking for someone else who might be interested in teaching alternative processes. One day when I was at work, Bella [Isabella Ford] came in, and I recognised her from uni and knew that she'd done alternative processing before, but we'd never actually met. Having just seen the application, I asked if she wanted to apply with me and if she had any friends that were into chemistry. She suggested her friend Lara Young, who was studying Biomed, might be really interested. So we did this workshop in Belgium together.

I also knew Luca [Zudich] through work, who had been studying Chem, now doing their Masters – a total genius. It was silly, dumb luck. From there we formed this collective and started running workshops wherever we could. We did some in our friends' gallery spaces, just by donation. It really just went from there. We continue to

experiment, have great chats over Zoom or in real life over a drink. We do a lot of hanging out. There might be a specified meeting time, but we all just chat about

everything. We talk about art and research, but also the day-to-day, which is so vital to a collective.

What is the main agenda or purpose of your collective?

Foremost, our purpose is to reimagine the traditions and materiality of photography. Being trained at a university where you learn photography in a very structured way, you have to start at the beginning. There are all these rigid rules and ideas of what the 'perfect print' looks like. I think it's important to learn those rules but also to then bend them. I found it so frustrating because I wanted to make 'bad' prints, I wanted to be able to make something that wasn't traditionally 'good' and then to understand *how* it wasn't good. That was the beginning of being interested in materiality, pushing the boundaries and conventions and figuring out how to fight them. Even in dark-room spaces, there would always be someone offering unsolicited advice. I always thought 'gosh, this is such a techy world', especially when it comes to photography as a medium – it's so tech orientated. People can get really caught up in these details, and sometimes they're important, but they can also be really smothering.

Another aim would be questioning the values of traditional methods of making, more specifically, the toxicity of the processes involved. The materiality of photography has always involved harsh chemicals – you're messing with bleach and horrible toxic chemicals, so of course there is a danger in that. It kind of hits you, exactly what you're messing with, the more you engage with it and test new methods of making. For a long time I felt really conflicted about making photographs. How can you make this rendition of a place and then in the same action, also [be] destroying it? It's this weird tension that exists, which is exactly what Collective Agitation picks at and tries to understand. We want to make this type of thinking accessible and make chemical understanding and

questioning a really fun and accessible conversation, without necessarily needing a background in chemistry. Science is something that for a very long time has felt out of reach for a lot of people in the arts if you don't speak that language of science. It's nice

to work with people that are interested in finding the easiest way to convey that information so people can feel excited by it.

What other collectives, artists and curators do you look to in formulating your own collective's position?

Firstly, LAPC [London Alternative Photography Collective]. They truly are the godfathers of alternative film developing. They've been around for ages; they've just had their 10th anniversary recently. That's why it's so exciting to work with them, we've been watching their work on the other side of the world and are just constantly inspired.

Wouter Van de Voorde is an incredible photographer, less with alternative chemistry but does amazing hand prints. He does a lot of textural work, and I also work with a lot of stitching, so I take inspiration from many of his panel works. Curiosolab is great with looking at sustainable, long-term approaches to film and developing. They find old x-ray sheets from eBay and that kind of thing, anthrotypes as well. I also love other archival photographic practices. Thomas Sauvin is an amazing example. He worked at a garbage disposal centre, and over the course of 10 years he finds all these abandoned negatives and created a really interesting archive.

How realistic is it to strive for a truly equal workload or levels of responsibility within a collective? Is this a priority of Collective Agitation?

Impossible. Whenever we think about how a collective 'should' function, we're modelling this off this very capital-driven structure, where everyone's being paid for certain hours.

It's very rigid, controlled, machine-like and production-centric. These are passion projects, and ultimately, passion is up and down. You move through life with other workloads, personal life, relationships, and things happen. That's the beauty of it all. You still have moments where you might feel like you haven't done enough, these negative emotions, but you've got to remind yourself that you're basing it off a structure that collectives can't fit inside. That's what makes them so great and different. Accepting

it is hard when across your entire life you've been working with delegated hours and tasks. It's about unlearning that structure and thinking about how to engage with our community outside of those rules to do with money and financial gain.

How did the collaboration between LAPC and Collective Agitation arise? Are there any key differences in the ways that the two collectives operate? How do you navigate working transnationally?

Nina [Sanadze] actually suggested that we reach out to LAPC. I loved their work and find them so inspiring, and it was someone that we all, individually and collectively look to for inspiration. LAPC is made up of so many people! That's a major difference, as we're just four tiny little people! It's hard to know other differences, as to really see a collective and understand how they function, you need to be in their presence physically.

We've mostly been working across messages and online meetings, but communicating digitally is so difficult. So much can be lost in translation. You just want to have a beer with someone and hang out. It's so formal over screen. The online world is so constructed and curated, and I think we believe we have to present that way through screens. It's definitely been a fun challenge, though.

How will the two collectives work together in the context of Collective Polyphony?

The exhibition intends to look like a living bibliography or conversation. The physical space will be an eclectic collection of books – photography books and research books that we've been looking at and annotating. It will include slides that we've created with different developing recipes, prints we've been experimenting with, jars of chemistry that we've used, creating a bit of a witchy alchemy situation.

We were wondering how best to physically incorporate LAPC despite the limitations of working transnationally. Posting things is tricky, as we are conscious of how sustainable posting large items across a huge distance is. We landed on the idea

of having a fax machine. They're going to fax over some of their research conversations and prompts. It'll be bellowing out all this information for the duration of the exhibition and plays with the idea of repurposing older, analog technologies. It's a great idea that LAPC came up with.

Science and art have traditionally been considered opposing fields of thought. How does the work of Collective Agitation integrate the differing modes of thinking of each discipline?

When we're having our conversations, you can definitely feel the difference between different modes of thinking. It's like another language. So often, in conversations we will have conflicting ideas. But it's such an interesting space because it makes you question the lens that you're putting on things and alternative ways of imagining the way that you're making something or seeing something. There is so much fun and play that can happen between art and science that often doesn't happen. There's almost egos involved, and a tension between what is better, more authentic to the experience of life. This thought that we can only pick one, and one is wrong and one is right. It's very binary, there's no intersection.

So, that's exactly what we try to do, pick apart the potential for intersection. For instance, I can understand science through a very 'art' lens and Luca can understand

art through a very science lens. I'm a very 'feely' sort of person, so when I'm in the lab trying new things, I think 'this might work', but so often people from a science background will think it doesn't work, and it ends up working! I'm such a backward worker, and I think a lot of science people work forwards, rather than make it and figure it out backwards.