



UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

This is a repository copy of *The Spectacle of "Nothing": the image, material, and object in a photographic ecosystem of Antarctica*.

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:

<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/180308/>

Version: Accepted Version

Article:

Watkins, E orcid.org/0000-0003-2093-6327 (2021) The Spectacle of "Nothing": the image, material, and object in a photographic ecosystem of Antarctica. *Photographies*, 14 (3). pp. 481-503. ISSN 1754-0763

<https://doi.org/10.1080/17540763.2021.1960412>

Reuse

Items deposited in White Rose Research Online are protected by copyright, with all rights reserved unless indicated otherwise. They may be downloaded and/or printed for private study, or other acts as permitted by national copyright laws. The publisher or other rights holders may allow further reproduction and re-use of the full text version. This is indicated by the licence information on the White Rose Research Online record for the item.

Takedown

If you consider content in White Rose Research Online to be in breach of UK law, please notify us by emailing eprints@whiterose.ac.uk including the URL of the record and the reason for the withdrawal request.



eprints@whiterose.ac.uk
<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/>

Liz Watkins, 'The Spectacle of 'nothing': the image, material and object in a Photographic Ecosystem of Antarctica', *photographies* (2021) 14, 3, pp.481-503.

E- Prints:

<https://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/BJQP8PZJZATJ4CI8BCJN/full?target=10.1080/17540763.2021.1960412>

'The Spectacle of 'nothing': the image, material and object in a Photographic Ecosystem of Antarctica'

Abstract: Photographic records of early 1900s polar expeditions encapsulated a paradox: the spectacle of 'monotonous' 'numbing whiteness' in images of 'nothing' that were intended for public exhibition. This essay examines expedition photography as an ecosystem of materials and meanings to reconsider the status of the 'failed' photographic experiments that have remained sublimated to the iconic images of polar exploration. Light sensitive materials - photographic emulsion layered onto glass plates and strips of flexible transparent celluloid nitrate film - are integral to the registration of the image. However, these materials are also susceptible to the effects of humidity, touch and variations in temperature. Anomalies, such as details that were effaced by overexposure to light and the fingerprints and watermarks that registered the effects of labour in a polar climate, can be found in the images that were occluded from exhibition: these 'failed' photographic plates remain integral to the ideation of the incomprehensible in narratives of polar exploration. The scientific and photographic experiments, which examined the potential of camera technologies and photosensitive materials to document time and movement, were undertaken in solitude and collaboration. Amateur, scientific and professional photographic practices record an image and material trace of work in an inhospitable climate. In this context, experimental and 'failed' images can be read as part of an ecosystem of interactions that begins to decipher the popularity of Ponting's 1911 photograph 'Ice-Blink', the image of a seemingly featureless ocean horizon, as the commodification of 'nothing' in discursive spaces of exhibition.

Key words: scientific photography, exhibition, indexicality, materiality, polar expeditions