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devastating. 🥵 #Australia



♥ 347K 5:49 PM - Jan 6, 2020



💬 78.7K people are talking about this



Previous image reposted without crediting source via [twitter.com/rhianna]. 6th January 2020.

At the same time as this tide of disinformation was washing through, there had been a push—as there often is—to find a specific ‘hero’ image to describe events during bush fire season and summarise what had been going on.

The New York Times located a photographer in Australia and commissioned him to take the picture shown opposite. It features the front of a house enveloped by fire with a kangaroo and some straggly plants silhouetted in front of it.

[Image reference #2: The 'Hero' image]

The image assemblage on the page overleaf is the result of a quick Google search for 'Australian bush fire images'. *The New York Times* was explicit in their seeking of a singular 'iconic' image (or a 'hero' image to use journalistic jargon) that would become a useful signifier of this event. This one image would then be passed around, as the one true image of the event, before bommeranging back to it's source. They even published an article named '*In One Photo Capturing the devastation of Australia's Fires*', where they explained how they located a photographer who was in Australia at the time (Matthew Abbott) and commissioned him to go find the one iconic image that would represent this event.

Referring again to T J Demo: this is where "the insufficiency of images" taken to depict catastrophic or pyrocentric events becomes evident. A further extension to Demos discussion would be to say that **burning aesthetics are also burnt**—they turn to ashes. Their duration is always limited—even with (especially with) repetition. Even though the shown overleaf was churned and churned, it has now dissipated. **We burn through burning images**. They do not last. In this, they like the things they seek to represent.

3.

SHIMABUKURO, MARK (WRITER) & ABBOTT, MATTHEW (PHOTOGRAPHER).
'IN ONE PHOTO, CAPTURING THE DEVASTATION OF AUSTRALIA'S FIRES'.
THE NEW YORK TIMES, 9 JANUARY 2020. [NYTIMES.COM/2020/01/09/
READER-CENTER/AUSTRALIA-WILDFIRE-PHOTO.HTML]

4.

FOR T J DEMOS SEE PREVIOUS IMAGE REFERENCE (#1)



Google image search results for 'Australia bush fire', c.February 2020.



Bojkowski, Michael. 'Invasion (Australia) day rally attendee' holding placard replicating image below. 26th January 2020.



Abbott, Matthew (photographer). 'Image of a burning home in Lake Conjola in New South Wales'. *The New York Times*, 9th January 2020.

**“For years,
Worthington had
relied on the
images left on
his retina”**

DASTON, LORRAINE & GALISON, PETER. 'PROLOGUE'. *OBJECTIVITY*, P.13.
ZONE BOOKS, NEW YORK, 2007.

**“The Observer
now aimed to be
a machine.”**

DASTON, LORRAINE & GALISON, PETER. 'TRUTH TO NATURE'.
OBJECTIVITY, P.104. ZONE BOOKS, NEW YORK, 2007.

“I found myself regularly going outside to look for evidence of what was going on (rather than relying on news or shared media)—evidence that I could see with the skin in my eye.

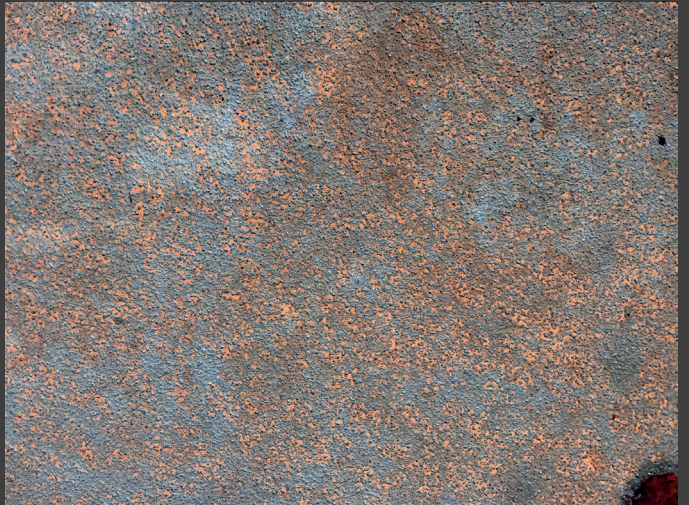
Sometimes I would photograph these and share these observations.

One particular evening I was surveying the sky—because people would talk about the sky and how it was changing. The atmosphere on this particular night had an ominous tinge to it, mostly because it was very hot and very cloudy.

And the clouds were this purpley-orangey-pinky colour. They looked heavy, but they were also this weirdly, bright, luminous colour. I took a photo of the sky and shared it on Instagram. The weather app on my phone was predicting it was going to be around 40 degrees the next day (the weather was becoming harder to predict as patterns changes occurred in shorter and shorter increments so any weather advisory service could only be taken as serving approximate readings).

If it was going to be a really hot day, I would just shut up the house and hide out inside until the heat had passed. So the next morning I set about doing just that. As I was pulling down blinds and shutting doors, I stepped up to the front yard for a brief moment. Recently, the surface had been waterproofed using a pale blue, rubbery-looking substance. It was really bright—like the bottom of a clean swimming pool. And this very fine layer of red dust had settled over everything I could see in the yard. The ground was now an odd, orangey blue colour...

And I took a photo of it.



Bojkowski, Michael. Untitled image. c. January 2020.

But I didn't take it because I wanted to show anyone,
and I didn't even take it because I wanted to look at it later.
It's an image you shouldn't be able to see, because
I didn't take it for you. I didn't even take it for me to look at.
I didn't take it for Instagram.
I had no intention of sharing it.
For some reason, it was important to my survival.

I didn't know what it signified for me, or how it was going
to help me survive. But it just needed to be seen, to be
witnessed—firstly—by me, then secondly—by my phone
and my camera and to be recorded.

I will keep it.

I probably won't need to look at it again.

It's not particularly aesthetically appealing.

Doesn't really tell you a lot.

It doesn't tell anyone who's doesn't know why the image
was taken a lot.

Also, I don't feel compelled to explain it.

I think the events around it were explanation enough.

[Image reference #3: Abstraction]

The use of abstracted images emerged as a common tactic for talking about the fires, away from news cycles and social media memes. Because they negated literal readings, abstracted images were useful in pinpointing personal observations or specific events or perspectives. The images overleaf were posted to Instagram by Melbourne-based artist Nicholas Mangan. To talk about recent events (in 2020), he chose an image from 2009. This brought to mind a couple of aspects often overlooked when attempting to capture images of catastrophic and/or burning events—that of duration and **acceleration**.

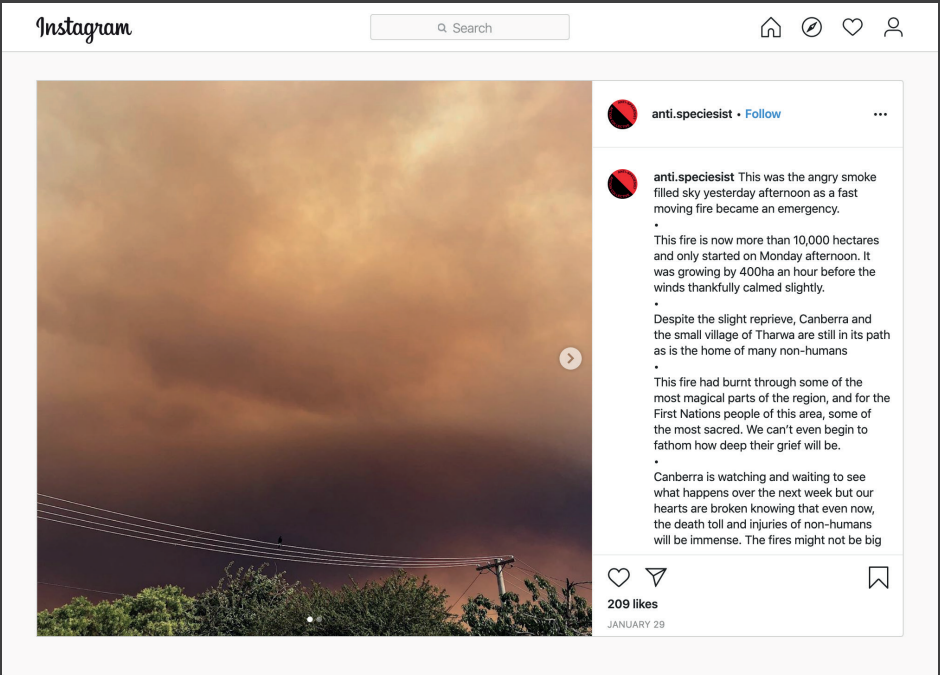
Wild fires require accelerant. This is how they grow and spread. The aforementioned 'controlled burning' has the goal of removing potential accelerant from a bush fire's path. Fires also create accelerant by using combustible material as fuel. It is the momentum within this relationship that is often the most daunting aspect of fire fighting.

It was in 1991 that Douglas Coupland released his career defining novel *Generation X* with the subtitle 'Tales of an Accelerated Culture'. He wasn't speaking literally about fire but the comparison stands. From the perspective of his novel, the essence of acceleration and 'Accelerated Culture' points to a continuum where more and more information, and lived experience, is compressed into shorter and shorter timeframes or durations. And like through just this lens.

In an essay entitled 'Dirty Pictures', artist and researcher Susan Schuppli puts forward a case for the classifying of images of environmental disasters in order to enact a "modest attempt to create a new concept worthy of troubling the events of climate change". She imbues this classification of images with the possibility to "generate novel forms of action" and "give rise to alternate political imaginaries". But her description fails to address the durational aspects around environmental disaster.

Looking through the lens of Generation X, from back in 1991, the 'Dirty Pictures' Schuppli describes already appear outmoded and slow. Too slow to be able to accurately describe the catastrophe or disasters or events they portray. Even whilst attempting to define and discuss the genre, Schuppli finds herself seduced into staring at the "natural chromatic potential of hydrocarbon atoms ... activated by the change in density of the oil film's molecules" producing "rainbow-like effects". The image is now rendered devoid of urgency—any urgency around the subject matter disappears.

The definitions around 'Dirty Pictures' probably need to be expanded if these images are to have any potency. Looking at like tools that are inherent to image making may offer a way through. Tools such as 'before and after' images or 'after images' (those flashes of images that are retained as bright shadows on the retina) or the use of images within sequences. All these tools help in giving a sense of duration or urgency—of an event that is escalating or accelerating.



Anti-speciesist (account). "This was the angry smoke filled sky yesterday afternoon as a fast moving fire became an emergency." Posted to Instagram on January 29th 2020.

Possibly when you're facing the kind of acceleration that comes with catastrophe, you're not going to have time to share an images. The image I took is not going to form part of a thesis. It's not going to provide some sort of activism. It's not going to do anything other than confirm what is happening in front of you. And that is the truley catastrophic image—the one your see, firstly, with the skin of your eye and then with the lens of your phone... and that's it.

ADDITIONAL NOTES

The Catastrophic Image & The Skin of Your Eye

was produced as a response to readings discussed as part of *The Critical Image* (2020) programme led by Lua Vollaard as part of the *Critical Inquiry Lab* (formerly Design Writing & Curation) MA led by Saskia von Stein at Design Academy Eindhoven in 2020.

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THE CATASTROPHIC IMAGE
& THE SKIN OF YOUR EYE
IS A BREIF DISCUSSION ON THE
URGENCY OF IMAGES WHEN FACING
CATASTROPHIC EVENTS, TOLD
FROM THE VANTAGE POINT OF
THE 2020 AUSTRALIAN BUSH
FIRE SEASON. TEXTS DISCUSSING
'BURNING AESTHETICS' AND
'DIRTY PICTURES' ARE ANALYSED.
IMAGES ASSOCIATED WITH THE
DISCUSSION ARE ALSO INCLUDED.
MICHAEL BOJKOWSKI, 2020.

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OF STORIES BIBLIOTHEEK', 2020.

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