**Make Practice Perfect (Fig. 1)**

In my address for Make Practice Perfect I intend to approach the issue of making work, and the barriers aspiring artists face when trying to do so, tangentially. Which is to say that in the paper I shall make a case for collaborative working practices, and I will do so by discussing the evolution of my own practice and the artist-led collective I founded, which is called Environmental Resistance. The benefits of collaboration are obvious. In the first instance collaborating – in my case with environmental scientists and other practitioners, such as graphic designers, – situates my practice as a photographer into a network of relations, which means I benefit from the expertise of the others I collaborate with. I am not alone. In turn this means that not only can we tackle projects that would be beyond my skillset as a photographer; it also implies that as a group we can access funding from other disciplines, such as environmental science, which diversifies for me the possibilities of making work. Secondly, by choosing to work within a very discrete genre of cultural production – in my case environmentalism – my practice is imbued with political intentionality. This gives me clarity, which is a great advantage. When you know what you stand for, making decisions is that much easier. However, before I go into details, let me first describe who I am and where my practice comes from but before I do so, I would like to begin with a series as assertions, or should I say provocations:

I am not here today to talk about myself. I hope that I have something much more critical to discuss.

* I am not standing in front of you as a successful photographer who has travelled the world incessantly or who has received lots of critical acclaim.
* Photography has not brought me fame, or fortune, though still it continues to perform a vital function in my life.
* Photography, whilst inhabiting the role of a constant companion has been an infrequent lover. I do not always make photographs, often I have very little to say.
* Without Photography I would be lost, though I often wonder why.
* The world has no need of further photographers but desperately requires freethinking individuals to question the social structures that surround us.
* In a society where photography is ubiquitous, more than ever the photographer must consider – *why photograph?*

**(Fig. 2)** It follows I am *not* here to tell you about the snowy weekend I spent holed up in seedy hotel in Blackpool, at the European Elvis Contest, that was the time I had talked a Phase One dealer into allowing me to use the P45 back, and the Mamiya system, in order to shoot the performers as they came off stage. We had a little studio set up and the idea was to get the impersonators singing and dancing in front of the camera, uninhibited. The concept had come from reading an account concerning the burial of Elvis, in which it was claimed that Elvis, tired of fame, had faked his own death and secretly continued to live disguised as an Elvis impersonator called ‘Orion’. According to the story, the entourage had buried a wax dummy on the day of the funeral. Elvis’s cousin Gene takes up the story **(Fig. 3)**:

The first thing I saw when I went to the coffin was the hands. They weren’t Elvis’s. You see, Elvis’s hands were big and beat up – calluses on the knuckles, scars, a crooked finger – all from karate, breaking boards, smashing bricks. The hands in the coffin were small and smooth as a woman’s, smooth as a baby’s behind. They were definitely not Elvis’s. Plus the sideburns were glued on; one was sticking straight out at the side. The nose was all wrong – pugged. Elvis had a straight nose. The eyebrows were wrong, the forehead wrong, the hairline wrong. I could even see where the hair had been glued around the forehead – you could see the glue.

So I photographed the impersonators working under the premise that perhaps one of them was the real Elvis and I called the project ‘Graced by Elvis’, as if I had been.

I am not here to tell you about this project because it is essentially meaningless; it was an art joke, vacuous and thematically unoriginal – exactly the type of work in demand. Within six months the work was exhibited in the Grundy Art Gallery, Blackpool, alongside the likes of Jeremy Deller and Graham Dolphin.

**(Fig. 4)** What I am here to talk about is how my rationale for Collaboration first developed from my interest in the photographic documentation of industrial pollution, which emerged almost by accident over a decade ago when I visited Eden, a small hamlet in Vermont, USA. My stay at an artists’ residency – the Vermont Studio Center – was paid for when I won a bursary from the VSC which allowed me the opportunity to document an abandoned asbestos mine in the nearby town of Ede.. So this is my first assertion for making practice perfect: apply for residency programmes, which will give you the opportunity to take time out, make work, and meet other artists from around the world. It also looks great on your CV. (**Fig. 5)** My time spent at Eden resulted in the documentation of Eden’s most notorious feature – the town’s abandoned asbestos mine, once the largest asbestos mine in the USA, its forced closure in the late 1990’s came swiftly as Federal Law had made it illegal to mine asbestos in the USA. However, no funds were allocated to cleaning up the site and the owner of the land was not obliged to take any action. As a result, the mine remained as it was on the last day of production with loading buckets laden with refined asbestos suspended in mid-air.

**(Fig. 6)** I photographed in Eden without having a clearly defined ethical stance towards the subject matter, and was simply photographing the mine as I discovered it. In covering the mine I conducted no protest, I appealed to no one, I took no ethical position. I maintained only a flawed objectivity without a coherent understanding as to *why* I was photographing an asbestos mine in Vermont. My motivations could be considered more self-centred than I care to admit. Regrettably, I had not stopped to ask myself who my audience was, and if the photographs would ever be shown to the local community, to government officials or to environmental organisations.

**(Fig. 7)** Following this realisation, some years later I undertook a project in collaboration with Greenpeace in Hungary. The project *Almásfüzitö: An Index*, was a protest against a dubious licence granted by the Hungarian government that allowed the TATAI company to blend toxic and non-toxic wastes at the rate of 132,000 tons per year into an unstable red mud pond situated on the banks of the Danube. This red mud is a highly caustic waste product from the production of aluminium, and the red mud ponds at Almásfüzitö represented a toxic legacy from the Soviet occupation of Hungary during the Cold War. So the inclusion of considerable quantities of industrial wastes into the red mud ponds, which were unsealed and susceptible to seismic fluctuations, represented a substantive environmental threat.

**(Fig. 8)** At the time, Greenpeace were pursuing legal action with the EU commission against a department in the Hungarian government for the issuing of the licence – a case they subsequently won some two years later. *Almásfüzitö: An Inde*x was disseminated in the form of a photobook to twenty individuals across the EU, who had some professional interest in the case. Some of the recipients represented the Hungarian government, others were EU ministers in neighbouring countries, or environmental scientists who might be sympathetic to the protest. In such cases, it was hoped that the publication would stimulate debate across a number of diverse professional communities around Europe.

**(Fig. 9)** Whilst my collaboration with Greenpeace was mutually beneficial, there was an inherent tension between the objectives of Greenpeace, with a clearly defined operational structure, and my position as an independent artist unaffiliated to the organisation. Behind the scenes Greenpeace supplied me with scientific data, maps, advice on how to enter the compound, and most importantly the contents of the TATAI licence, which formed the basis of the textual information accompanying the photographs. **(Fig. 10)** The final project is composed of ten diptych images in which the photographs, situated on the right, were accompanied by text panels on the left. Taken as one continuous sequence, the text panels detail the entirety of the TATAI licence, which is breath-taking in its scope and permitted TATAI to dump any kind of industrial waste into the unsealed basin of the Almásfüzitö red mud ponds **(Fig. 11)**.

Whilst the diptych format was a successful means of illustrating the environmental problems ongoing in this location, certain difficulties arose due to my informal partnership with Greenpeace. When it came to disseminating the photobook, the campaign managers at Greenpeace were unable to back my project publically because Greenpeace were operating their own PR strategy. As a result, it would have been easier to sell Greenpeace photographs of the TATAI plant, as a photojournalist might do, than it was to provide the organisation with a conceptualised artwork such as *Almásfüzitö: An Index*. It was from the lessons learned from that project, which made me determined to form a collective capable of acting as an NGO organisation might do, thereby dispensing with the need to be reliant upon outside agencies. Thus the collective Environmental Resistance came into fruition, emerging out of my realisation that as a photographer interested in documenting industrial pollution, I had to develop a method of working in order to situate my photographs into a cultural context where I felt my work could make a real contribution. However, this is not to say that working with NGO’s is a bad idea. It isn’t at all. Greenpeace helped me secure access to the site and the collaboration ensured that my portfolio developed and I made important contacts. So my second assertion for making practice perfect is – if you are at all politically inclined, consider working with NGOs in order to improve your own visibility.

Environmental Resistance can be described as an artist-led group, which benefits from the diverse skills of its members. Although membership of the collective is open and contributors are free to come and go as they please, thus far Environmental Resistance has been comprised of a photographer, an environmental scientist, a graphic designer and a translator/ interpreter. The decision to assume the identity of a collective remains important to me as a photographer because it has the advantage of shifting emphasis away from a model of practice, which promotes the individual artist as author and producer of the work, to one that emphasises collaborative agency between all participants. Importantly, working within the collaborative structure of the collective, has the advantage of helping to constitute a group identity, which in turn led to the development of a mission statement in which a series of ethical and political objectives could be clearly defined **(Fig. 12)**.

Environmental Resistance can be described as an artist-led environmentalist group, which benefits from the diverse skills of its members. Our work is carried out on a not-for-profit basis with funding and in-kind assistance mainly deriving from educational institutions and grants for the arts. The objective of Environmental Resistance is to protest against incidents of industrial pollution in the landscape. We also campaign for corporate responsibility towards the environment and for the remediation of polluted spaces. Our projects are undertaken on a unilateral basis or in partnership with environmental activist networks. Using the combined skills of our members we aim to educate, promote and provoke in order to improve the visibility of the environmental struggles we are representing.

**(Fig. 13)** Another project I would briefly like to describe today is called *No Al Carbone, Brindisi* and its name refers to an environmental activist group No Al Carbone, which means ‘No Coal’, who have been active in their hometown of Brindisi, in Puglia southern Italy, for a number of years. The group can muster a membership in the low hundreds for significant events, such as large street protests. Populated entirely by local volunteers, the organisation very successfully raises awareness of the health problems associated with the four coal-fired power stations, and various petro-chemical works, that constitute the nearby Brindisi Industrial Zone, – which has blighted this part of the Aegean coast since the 1980s. The work that we made in this project is presented in the form of a dedication to this activist group, and for this reason the catalogue we produced is adorned with their uniform and logo – the black T-shirt. The publication is not only dedicated to No Al Carbone, it is intended to function as a go-to resource, which can be effective when activist’s are engaged in advocacy with members of the public or with representatives of the state.

**(Fig. 14)** The photographic series begins with a satellite photograph, which not only provides a detailed overview of the companies operating in the Brindisi Industrial Zone, it also details previous convictions, which various industrial producers have been subject to for violation of existing EU environmental regulations. Throughout the course of the series, the satellite map also acts as a way-finding tool, enabling the audience to determine the approximate position of each photograph.

**(Fig. 15*)*** *No Al Carbone* then proceeds to examine distinct geographical aspects of the industrial zone. The photo series begins with an examination of the port area, which is where ships carrying coal from the Balkans dock, and offload their cargo for transport to Brindisi’s four coal-fired power stations. A common feature in many of the photographs of the port area is the presence of coal dust and the close proximity of allotments and small-scale farming enterprises, which further rely upon coal-infused water drawn from nearby streams and aquifers. **(Fig. 16)** However, such visible signs of pollution simply mask the significant threat offered by the presence of invisible complex organic compounds, such as PAHs (Polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons), which are carcinogenic and have building up both on land and in the sea, due to illegal dumping of industrial waste by nearby industrial producers **(Fig. 17)** for decades.

**(zoom in to caption)** In *No Al Carbone*, the photograph is anchored by a series of captions, both in Italian and English, summarising published scientific papers which point towards elevated rates of congenital birth deformities in babies, above average rates of lung cancers, beryllium poisoning and COPD in the local population. Furthermore, by using the QR code located alongside each caption, the audience can find the scientific paper in full – and here we tried our best to ensure that the links referred to Open Access articles. I argue that the presence of QR codes in the No Al Carbone publication is a mechanism that empowers the audience, by enabling them to discover scientific data or additional sources of information concerning pollution in the Brindisi Industrial Zone for themselves. In this sense, the existence of the QR codes, which expand upon the summaries offered by the captions, and validate our claims to knowledge, serve to alter the status of the reader from an initial position of passivity to that of an active researcher. In the context of the on-going political situation in Brindisi, one of the aims of the *No Al Carbone* publication was to raise awareness concerning the existence of scientific texts, in order to widen participation in environmentalist discourse within the region.

In the counterposition of “Image versus Text”, I argue that in the process of viewing the artwork a rupture occurs between sensation (from the initial encounter with beauty in the image), and understanding (from the disclosure offered by the text). The experience of encountering this “rupture” between sensation and understanding is one way of describing the audience’s emotive engagement with the art object, and it is in this moment that political intentionality is realised.

**(Fig. 18)** Importantly, good design for visualising what could also be described as ‘information advocacy’, is one that achieves its intended purpose of communication within a network of cultural, social and political interactions. Gunter Kress, a theorist on the subject of social semiotics, puts the point clearly when he observes:

Rhetorical processes underlie, precede and then become design processes. The rhetor’s task is a political one, with political and communicational effects, namely to provoke and produce the rearrangement of social relations by semiotic means. The designer’s task by contrast is a semiotic one; to transform political intent into semiotic form’.

Walter Benjamin makes a similar point in *The Author as Producer* when he claims that the art object must be ‘inserted into the context of living social relations’. According to Benjamin, the photograph’s propensity for representing the ugly subject matter of environmental pollution, in a manner that evokes only beauty, must be resisted. Instead, Benjamin calls for the addition of captions to accompany the photographs, which as he states serves to confer upon the photograph ‘a revolutionary use value’.

**(Fig. 19)** The *No Al Carbone* photographic series also documents a thirteen-kilometre road and conveyor belt installation, which stretches from the port area to the Cerano power station in the south of the industrial zone. This coal transportation network provides a barrier to wildlife in the ecosystem and is also a source of coal pollution in the fields adjacent to the road. On the occasions when the network floods, coal dust is also carried off into fields and river systems whereupon it can enter the food web of the ecosystem.

**(Fig. 20)** Another territory profiled in the series relates to a huge fly-ash pond, which is the ash left over from the combustion of coal in the four power stations within the industrial zone. The site known as Micorosa covers a surface area of around 50 hectares and is located partially within a National Park, which is a valuable salt marsh for nesting sea birds. In the past the area has been used as a landfill site of between 2 and 7 metres in depth, for calcium hydroxide waste. At regular intervals around the site, small emergency surveying probes can be observed. **(Fig. 21)** There are around 200 of these vents in total and they reach to a depth of 150 metres. Installed only two years ago, the probes are used to measure the extent of mineral pollution in the sub-soil and in subterranean aquifers. Over the last couple of years, sample analysis has shown that the sub-soil and water is heavily polluted with arsenic, mercury and carcinogenic chlorate compounds, hydrocarbons and chloro-benzenes. It is estimated that remediation of the site will cost 100 million Euros, although the real figure could in excess of double this amount.

**(Fig. 22)**. The last section in the photobook concerns the Cerano PowerStation itself, which is the largest source of fossil fuel pollution in Italy and one of the largest polluters in Europe. In a report published by Greenpeace, it is estimated that Cerano, and the other three power stations in the zone, are responsible not only for contributing to climate change, but also for an estimated 521 premature deaths in the Brindisi region per annum. **(Fig. 23)** Emulsified bitumen was employed as a fuel at the Cerano plant from 1996 onwards. Sea water was then used to cool the capacitors, and as part of the process the water is treated with chlorine, and released back into the marine environment. In 1999 a survey was conducted to establish if PAH’s could be detected in seawater offshore from Cerano as a direct result of using the water as a cooling agent. Results from the survey showed elevated levels of PAH contamination in the immediate foreshore, but importantly this is also an area where local anglers fish for sea urchins and mussels who feed on the contaminated silt.

**(Fig. 24)** No Al Carbone Brindisi provides a model of how collaborative working practices can provide a ‘service’ for localised activist struggles, by synthesising an indexical description of the Brindisi industrial zone with an overview of the environmental health implications, which have been suggested by a variety of scientific studies. In this way, an imaginative combination of art and scholarly research can be of benefit to activists who are intimate with the environmental problems that are impacting upon their community. It is precisely this level of political intentionality which informs my practice. So this is my third assertion for making practice perfect: stand for something. One you have defined your ethical position as a cultural producer, everything else follows from there. Most of all, be true to yourself.

In terms of the collective structure of Environmental Resistance, It is a matter of concern that the internal dynamics of the collective have yet to express the democratic participatory ideals, which define Environmental Resistance’s ethical commitment to informing the audience about the dangers of industrial pollution. This is undoubtedly represents a problem for the collective as it moves forward to tackle forthcoming projects. Perhaps the only way to move beyond the current status quo, whereby the photograph – and thereby photographer – inhabits a position of artistic dominance within the structure of the collective, is to develop a model of collaborative artistic practice, which is increasingly less reliant upon the medium specificity of photography. To this end, the longevity of Environmental Resistance as a collective depends in no small part upon the inclusion of additional members, who have the capacity to influence future projects by diversifying the range of aesthetic possibilities offered by the collective.

As the photographer in the group, my role was to initially document the topography of the Brindisi industrial zone and to gain the trust of the NAC activists in order to initiate the partnership. Subsequently, in the design phase of the publication I acted as project manager by liaising with the others members of the group – who find it hard to meet in person due to work and family commitments. As the founder of the collective, and as the photographer in a project that was dominated by the medium of the photography, it was inevitable that I maintained editorial control over the direction of the research whilst simultaneously being dependent upon the contributory skills of my co-authors. Seen in this context, Environmental Resistance can be described as an artist-led collective that has *yet* to realise it’s truly democratic potential within its own internal structure.

If my decision to work collaboratively began with the desire to depart from the notion of the photographer as the sole author and producer of the artwork, the culmination of collaborative working practice should necessitate a scenario whereby the photographer takes up the position of a quasi-anonymous worker, who is capable of contributing to the collective as one specialist within a congregation of specialisms. As such, I consider myself to be slowly working towards my own disappearance.

By addressing specific environmental and political concerns in my practice, I have been able over the last number of years to pursue a fully funded PhD in photography and environmental activism, which in turn resulted in the opportunity to become a Leverhulme Artist in Residency at the Environmental Science department in the University of Hull. One thing leads to another, and from that I was able to secure a lecturing position at the University of Lincoln, which has led to securing yet more funding to photograph this summer in Sardinia, where we shall be looking at synthesising photography, environmental science and anthropology using augmented reality software. This brief overview of my trajectory, and the evolution of my practice, leads me to my final assertion for making practice perfect –I have found a means to fund my practice by working within academia, and whilst this is by no means perfect and in many respects represents a huge compromise, it remains a route that should be considered, especially in times of austerity and cut backs for the arts across the sector generally.

Thank you for you time.