

Tom Pope + Matthew Benington

Almost Nothing But Blue Ground



Photo by Tom Pope + Matthew Benington

Created by Tom Pope + Matthew Benington

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Photo by Silas Money

Almost Nothing But Blue Ground

Tom Pope and Matthew Benington combine storytelling, archival material, and collaboratively made cyanotype prints in a performative lecture. Since 2018 they have worked on a collaborative project, [Almost Nothing But Blue Ground](#), exploring the work and life of Anna Atkins, the first person to publish a book of photographic images.

The work specifically focuses on the book, [Cyanotypes of British and Foreign Ferns](#), which Atkins created collaboratively with Anne Dixon. While researching, the discovery was made that Atkin's husband and father-in-law jointly owned at least eight plantations and thousands of slaves in Jamaica. Atkins both, directly and indirectly, benefited from the slave trade and colonial project. In addition to the life and work of Atkins, [Almost Nothing But Blue Ground](#) investigates the Victorian fern craze, land ownership, capitalism, and the colonial project in particular its links with botany and the plundering of foreign lands.

The research informed a performative weeklong walk (2021) from the house where Atkins lived in Tonbridge to Ferring where Dixon lived. On the walk, Tom and Matthew dragged a trolley that carried photographic darkroom equipment; it also acted as a table where they ate and socialised with people they met along the way and discussed the impetus of the project.

[Roger Griffith MBE](#) and [Caroline Douglas](#) have both made written contributions to the project. They are incorporated as audio readings in the performative lecture.

Upon completion of the 45-minute performative lecture a 25-minute conversation with the audience takes place that explores how the research discoveries can inform our communities and wider society to make real world change going forwards.

The performance can be accompanied by an exhibition of cyanotype photographs and objects from the research and performative walk.

The performative walk was supported by an Arts Council England Project Grant. The development of the performative lecture has been supported by [Forma HQ](#).



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Artist Biographies

Tom Pope

Tom Pope works in performance and photography. Play is at the core of his practice; it is both subject matter for his works but also embedded in how he utilises the photographic medium. Pope often re-establishes photographic processes as participatory performative games. His interest in play stems from the lived experience of his working-class roots, from attending a working men's club and playing team sports and games.

In 2011 he won the Deutsche Bank Artist Award for the project Time Bound. Recent projects include One Square Club, at Frieze Art Fair Los Angeles, a performance work and the world's most exclusive private members club; Art Workout an online exercise video and participatory performance commissioned for Frieze New York online; and Terminating Martin Parr, a live performance where he destroyed 17 Martin Parr photographs.

Pope has work in the collections of the National Portrait Gallery, National Museum of Wales as well as various private collections. Pope lives and work in Hastings.

Matthew Benington

Matthew is an artist specializing in printmaking, working with themes of collective memory, gender, and land ownership. The concept of the folly - with connections to the colonial project, eccentricity, and charity - continues to be a hook around which he reflects and makes work

Notable projects include: Hide: The Apocryphal Archive, a folly he created and lined with etchings of his own family, dedicated to the displacement of people from their homes. Works such as Peep through Sham Castle consist of performative large-scale installations of images within preexisting outdoor architectural follies. Ideas about ruination, public monuments, and the repurposing of former industrial spaces inform his curatorial work with Unstable Monuments, ACE, Truro, 2016 and Unstable Monuments Bristol, a residency and exhibition in 2022.

Matthew lives in Nowirch and lectures on BA (Hons) Fine Art, Norwich University of the Arts.



Photo by Tom Pope + Matthew Berrington

Technical Specifications

Get-in requirement	3 hours
Get-out	2 hours
Running time	1 hour 10 minutes (45 minutes performative lecture + 25 minute conversation with the audience)
Travelling company	2 on the road + optional guest to contribute to post lecture conversation
Artists will provide	analogue OHP digital OHP projector speaker
Venue to provide	power cables space and screen to project onto space to hang 3x2m sheet of paper to be projected + drawn on

The lecture can be adjusted to be performed in lecture theatres, galleries, and studio spaces. Accompanying cyanotype prints and archival material can be laid out in the presentation space.

ACCESS

Seated performance. This work does not require audience movement and is suitable for audiences with limited mobility.