

RESEARCH PORTFOLIO

Almost Nothing But Blue Ground

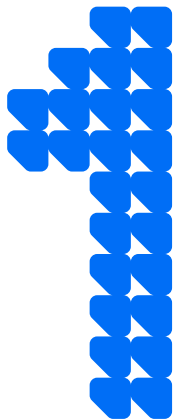
Matthew Benington

Output Reference: NOR-MB-001-PB
Output Date: 2021-2026

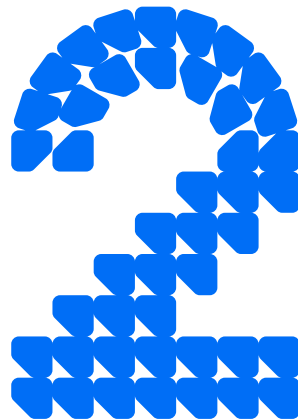
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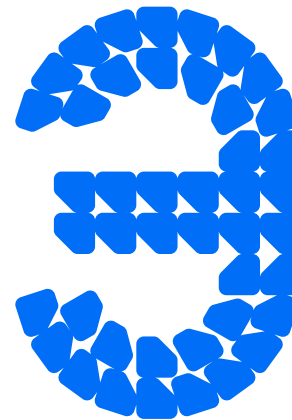
Contextual Information



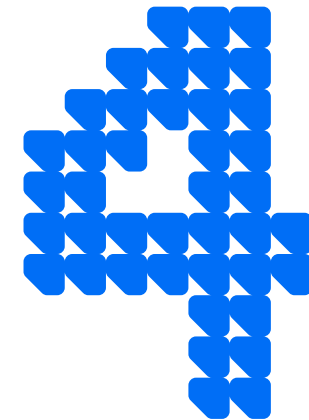
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Supporting Statement

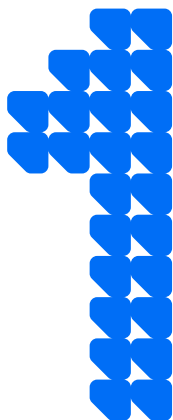
Output title: Almost Nothing But Blue Ground
Output type: M - Exhibition
Output date: 2021-2026

Almost Nothing But Blue Ground is a collaborative research project between artists Matthew Benington and Tom Pope. Benington and Pope began with the intention to explore and celebrate the life and work of Anna Atkins, the first person to publish a book of photographic images (*Photographs of British Algae*, 1843). The research informed a performative, 60-mile, weeklong walk in 2021, hand towing a trolley from which the artists exposed cyanotype prints, from the house where Atkins lived in Tonbridge to the coast at Ferring where her collaborator Anne Dixon lived. They walked via Sir John Herschel's House in Hawkhurst, who invented the cyanotype process and would have shared it with Atkins. After the walk in 2021 they moved on to commissioning

written responses to their burgeoning archive and disseminating their work via cyanotype workshops, public performances, conversations, and exhibitions. Benington and Pope's work simultaneously explores both the pioneering nature and complex legacy of Anna Atkins' work, whilst also investigating its relationship to the Victorian fern craze, land ownership, capitalism, and the colonial project, in particular its links with botany and slave plantations in Jamaica. The project is ongoing; the artists seek institutional change in terms of creating more equitable access and information in national collections that include Atkins' work, including the V&A Museum, The Natural History Museum and the Horniman Museum. The project has been funded by Arts Council, England.



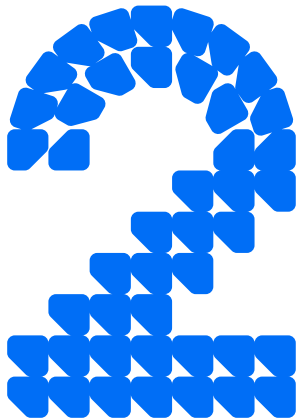
↑ 'Forced Fuel: Breadfruit', Cyanotype, 29.7 x 42cm (2021)



Research Process



↑ Still from performance lecture at Forma (2024)



After two years of research, Benington and Pope discovered many facts about Atkins, especially through focusing on her second publication *Cyanotypes of British and Foreign Ferns* (1853) made with Anne Dixon. In this publication of 100 cyanotype photograms, 25% represent Jamaican ferns. This led the artists to question why so many originated in Jamaica. After consulting the UCL 'Legacies of British Slavery' database they discovered that Atkins'

husband, John Pelly-Atkins, and her father-in-law, Alderman Atkins, owned nine plantations and 5000 enslaved people in Jamaica, as well as numerous boats and docks. This shifted the focus from not only celebrating the achievements of Atkins (particularly being a woman at that time), to also acknowledging the origins of her privilege. It's a project with a complex history, but no matter how difficult, these are histories that should be shared and discussed.

The completion of the Arts Council England (ACE) funded performative walk in 2021 created the *Almost Nothing But Blue Ground* archive, consisting of 120 artefacts: 52 cyanotype prints, photographic negatives, quotes from key texts, and digital prints depicting the walk. These form the content for the development of the project's performative lecture, which was debuted at Forma in 2021. The performative lecture lasts 45 minutes and is a combination of storytelling and live presentation of research via visualiser, data projector and overhead projector. The performance is followed with either a Q&A or a conversation chaired by a

local guest expert specialising in the themes arising from the project. The project's second round of successful ACE funding in 2023 supported the commissioning of Roger Griffith MBE (specialist in decolonisation), Dr Zakiya Mckenzie (British and Jamaican poet and writer), Dr Caroline Douglas (early female Scottish photography), and Sui Searle (gardener and author focused on decolonising the garden) to develop written responses to the project's archive. This funding supported touring the project to 13 venues, four exhibitions and 13 performances. By January 2026 the work will have toured to 18 venues in total.



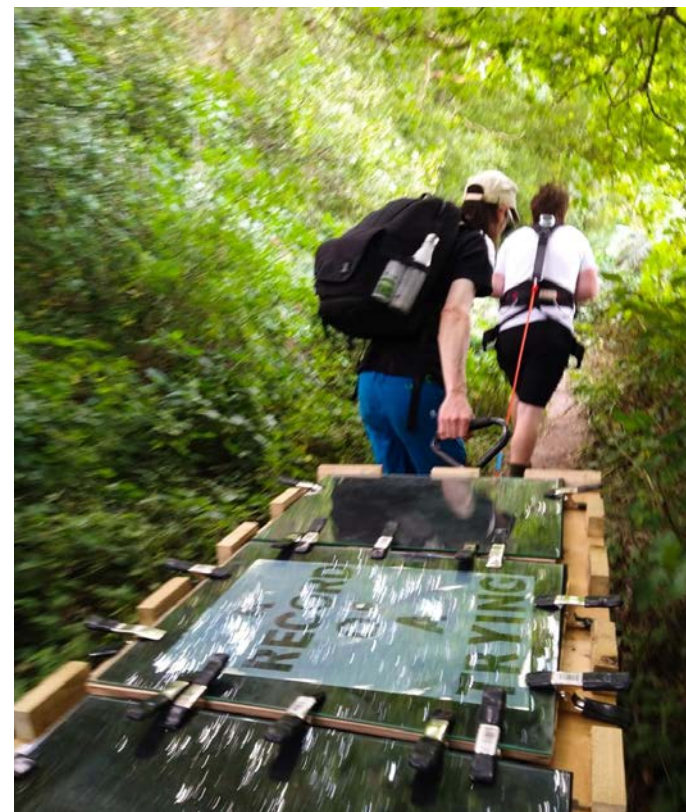
↑ Exterior image of East Gallery Norwich for 'Almost Nothing But Blue Ground' exhibition (2023)

Research Insights

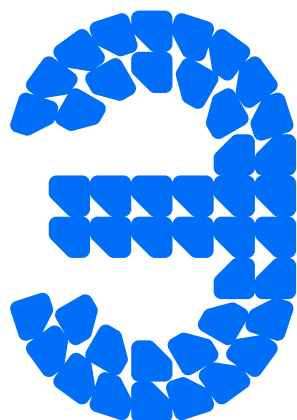
Benington and Pope's work highlights the undervalued but pioneering work of Anna Atkins and Anne Dixon in progressing early photography. It is also the first artistic exploration of the Atkins family's colonial history, and issue which other artists are now also beginning to explore. This project benefits from a unique, socially concerned, artistic, practice-based methodology which helps institutions better come to terms with their collections, so they can more equitably engage with the public whose interests they represent. The tour of the project embodies the diversity of content within its archive with the artists presenting the work across a range of venues, from galleries and gardens, to science museums and archives, to the Village Hall.



↑ View of exhibition installation at Old Big School Gallery in Tonbridge (2024)



↑ Still from performance research walk in August 2021



Dissemination

This project was first exhibited at East Gallery in Norwich 17 February – 18 March 2023, with performance guests Sarah Wilmot (Specialist Archivist at John Innes Centre) and Dr Emir Guarani (Collections Officer at Sainsbury Centre for Visual Art). The East Anglia Art Fund described the exhibition as:

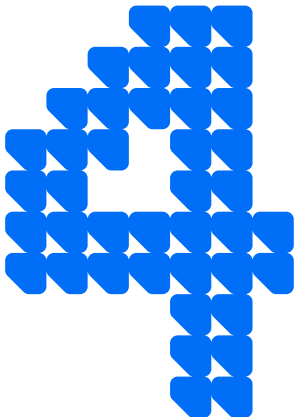
“a remarkable look into nature and humanity. ‘Almost Nothing But Blue Ground’ invites the viewer into its research, posing questions about land ownership and colonialism, as well as displaying beautiful cyanotypes of material found in the artists own research. The effect of this brilliant project is a critique of capitalism – at its heart the idea that no one can or should own nature.”

It has since been exhibited at

- Linnean Society of London (April, 2023)
- Forma in Southwark, London with special guests Richard Court (gardener) and John Hunnux (Curator of the Atkins Herbarium, Natural History Museum), and cyanotype workshop (April 2024)
- Natural History Museum in London with special guest Roger Griffith MBE (2024)
- Original Projects in Great Yarmouth with guest speaker James Bell (Senior Lecturer Photography, Norwich University of the Arts) and cyanotype workshop (May-July 2024)
- Kingston Museum in Kingston upon Thames (July-September 2024)
- Old Big School Gallery in Tonbridge with special guest Sui Searle (gardener, author, and founder of platform ‘Decolonising the Garden’) (September-November 2024)



↑ Exhibition and performance documentation ‘Chapter 9+10’, East Gallery (2023)



Benington and Pope also toured the project's performance lecture to the following venues:

- Brighton Photo Fringe Festival (November 2024)
- Kelvingrove Museum, Glasgow (November 2024)
- Salt Space, Glasgow (November 2024)
- Manchester Metropolitan University (November 2024)
- Salford University and Open Eye Gallery ARISE Symposium (November 2024)
- Ffotogallery, Cardiff (May 2025)

In 2024, Arts Council England funded a text-based commission by Dr Zakiya Mckenzie in response to the project and research archive, the title of which will be 'When Archives Give No Answers'.

The project will travel to Oxford History of Science Museum in October 2025, where an essay outlining the research project will feature on their digital collection archive alongside the work of other ACE commissioned academic contributors. It will also be exhibited and performed at the Royal Cornwall Museum in January-March 2026.



↑ Install photos of work at Forma, image shows cyanotype prints, acetate negatives and quotes used during the performative lecture (2024)



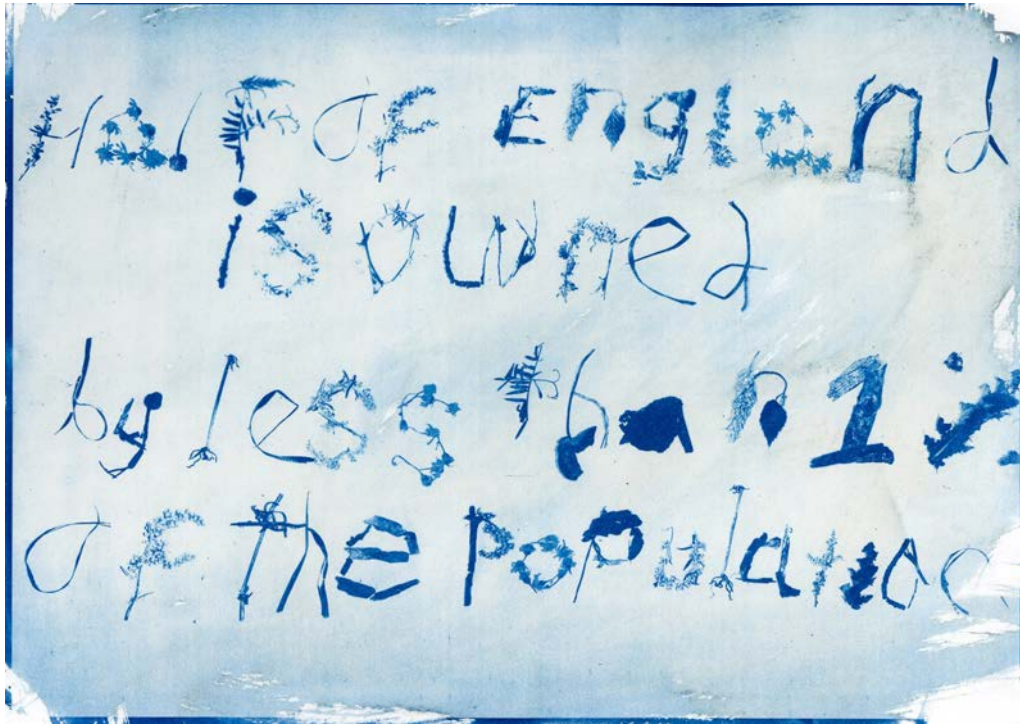
↑ Audience interacting with the exhibition at Old Big School Gallery, Tonbridge (2024)



↑ Still from performance at Old Big School Gallery in Tonbridge (2024)



↑ Exhibition installation at Forma (2024)



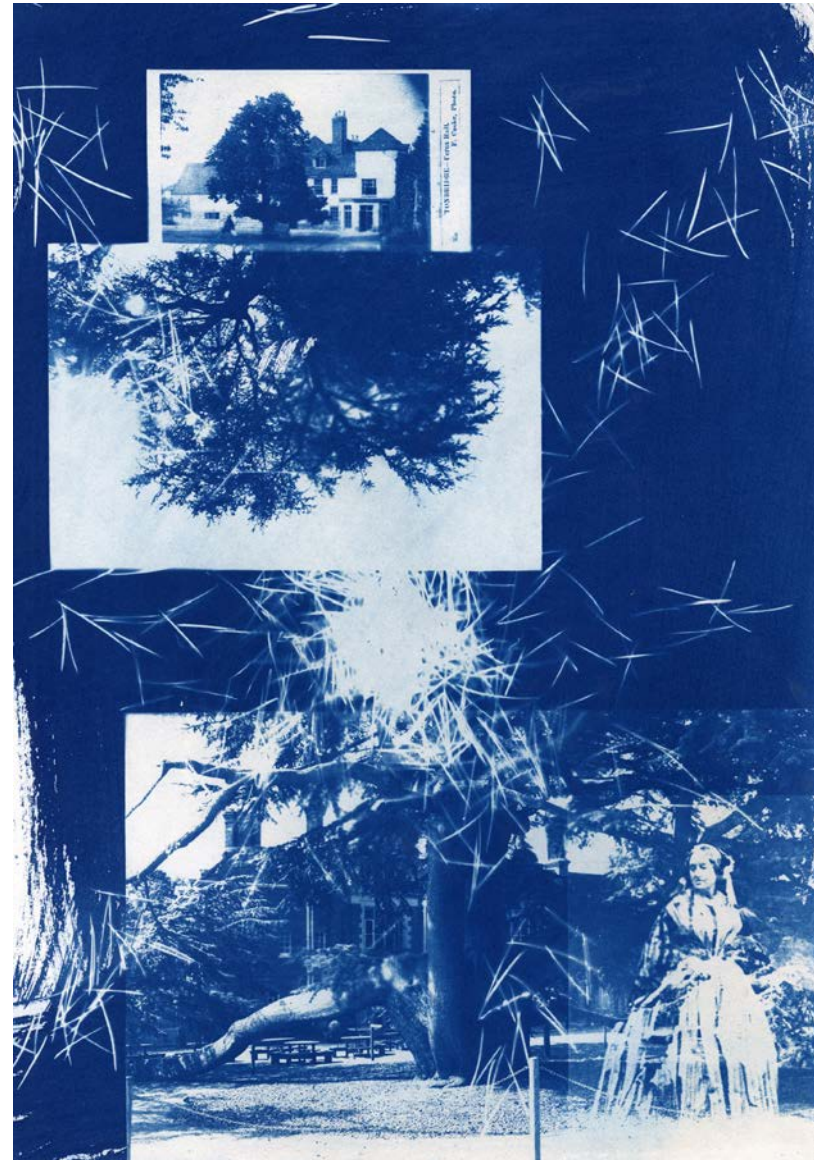
↑ '1%', Cyanotype, 29.7 x 42cm (2021)



↑ 'Kett's Oak A1243', Cyanotype, 29.7 x 42cm (2021)



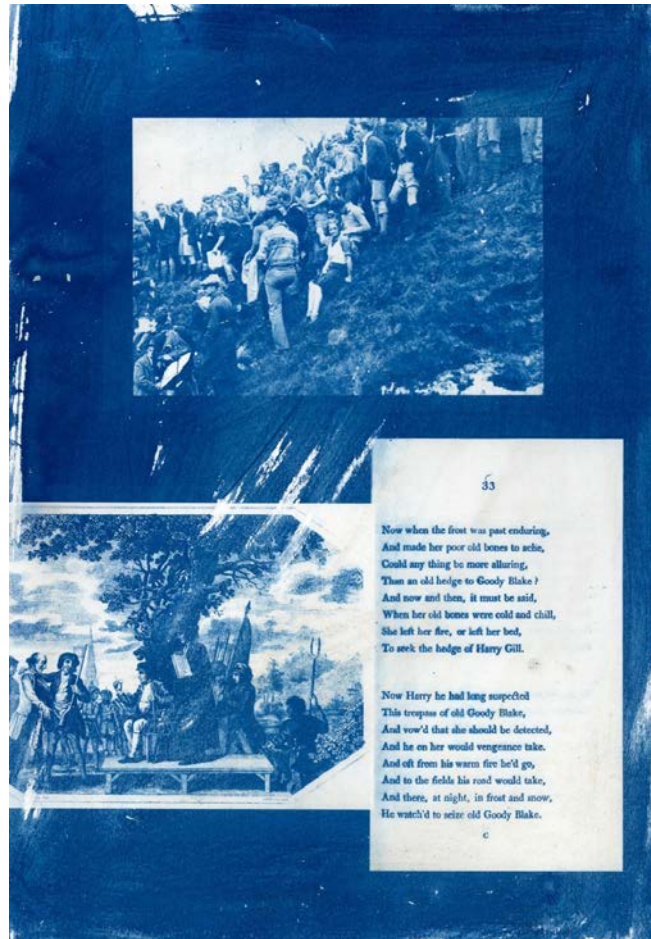
↑ 'The Imitation of Natural Conditions', Cyanotype, 42 x 29.7cm (2021)



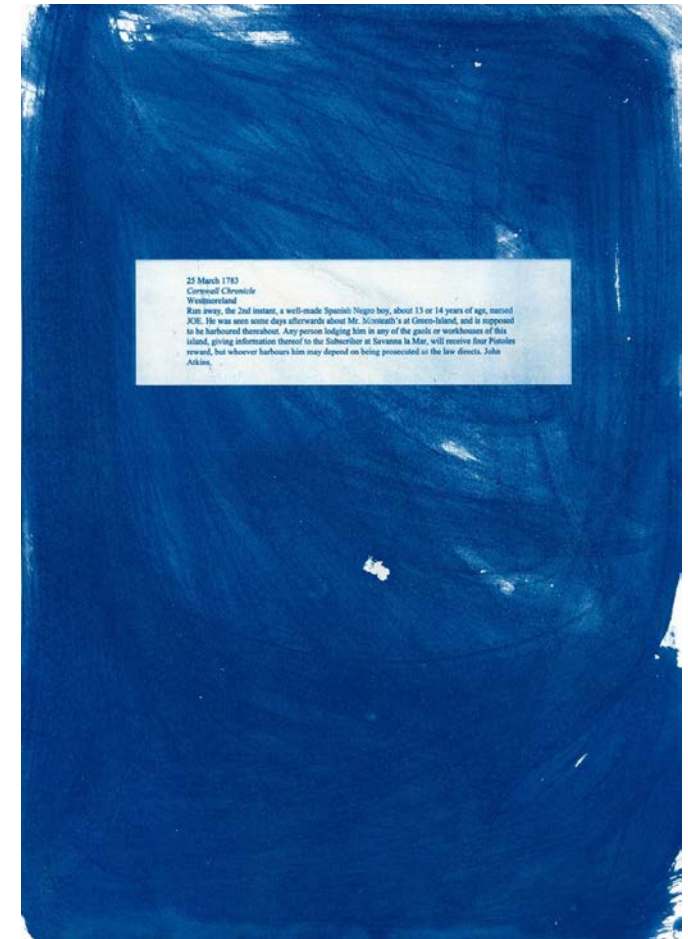
↑ 'The Ferox Hall Society', Cyanotype, 42cm x 29.7cm (2024)



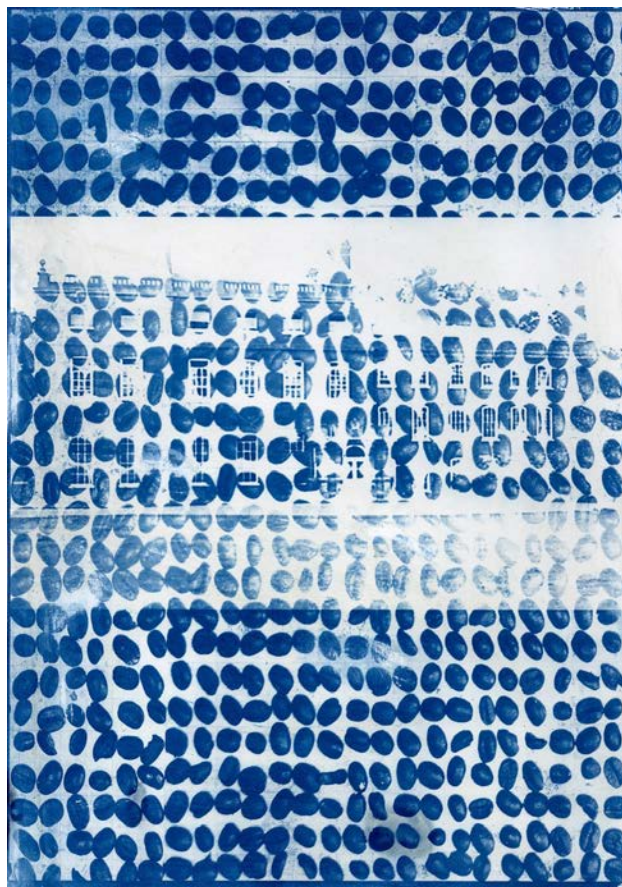
↑ 'Botanical Networks', Cyanotype, 42cm x29.7cm (2024)



↑ 'Conqueror's Hunt', Cyanotype, 42 x 29.7cm (2021)



↑ 'Cornwall Chronicle, 25th March 1783', Cyanotype, 42 x 29.7cm (2021)



↑ 'Counting Beans and Property... John Pelly Atkins, Halstead Place', Cyanotype, 42 x 29.7cm (2021)



↑ 'Footprints of Rebellion', Cyanotype, 42 x 29.7cm (2021)



↑ 'Seize and erase', Cyanotype, 42 x 29.7cm (2021)



↑ 'The Tree of Life', Cyanotype, 42 x 29.7cm (2021)



↑ 'Tools of Oppression', Cyanotype, 42 x 29.7cm (2021)



↑ Exhibition and performance documentation 'Chapter 12', East Gallery (2023)



↑ Still of performance lecture at East Gallery (2023)



↑ Exhibition and performance documentation, East Gallery (2023)



↑ Exhibition installation at East Gallery (2023)

