

University of Canberra

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Curating fragments: Found ekphrases volumes 1 & 2

Abstract:

In his essay ‘Self-extraction’, Ross Gibson suggests that ‘new creation comes not from some urwelt where ever-originating inspiration burns, but from the everyday world where all that is extant is ready for re-fashioning’ (2014: 9). He goes on to suggest that this ‘re-fashioning’ might take the form of ekphrasis which he defines as ‘the practice of glossing one mode of expression with another mode (2014, p. 12)’. The vast store of digitised information available via the internet (particularly of visual archives) provides opportunities for something that is at once, after Gibson, everyday but orients itself towards a longer tradition – that of ekphrastic poetry.

Combining found poetry with an ekphrastic manoeuvre, the poems in this paper are constructed from photographic archives (taken in this case from the NASA and Kodak collections on Flickr) and online searches done using the catalogued title of the photograph. These produce odd and often surprising conjunctures between the photograph and text, and between various pieces of text as they are ‘found’ from the search engine. Together these constructions (picture and text) are traces of the original content, worked into pieces that combine to exceed the sum of their parts that, in their repurposing, haunts the originals.

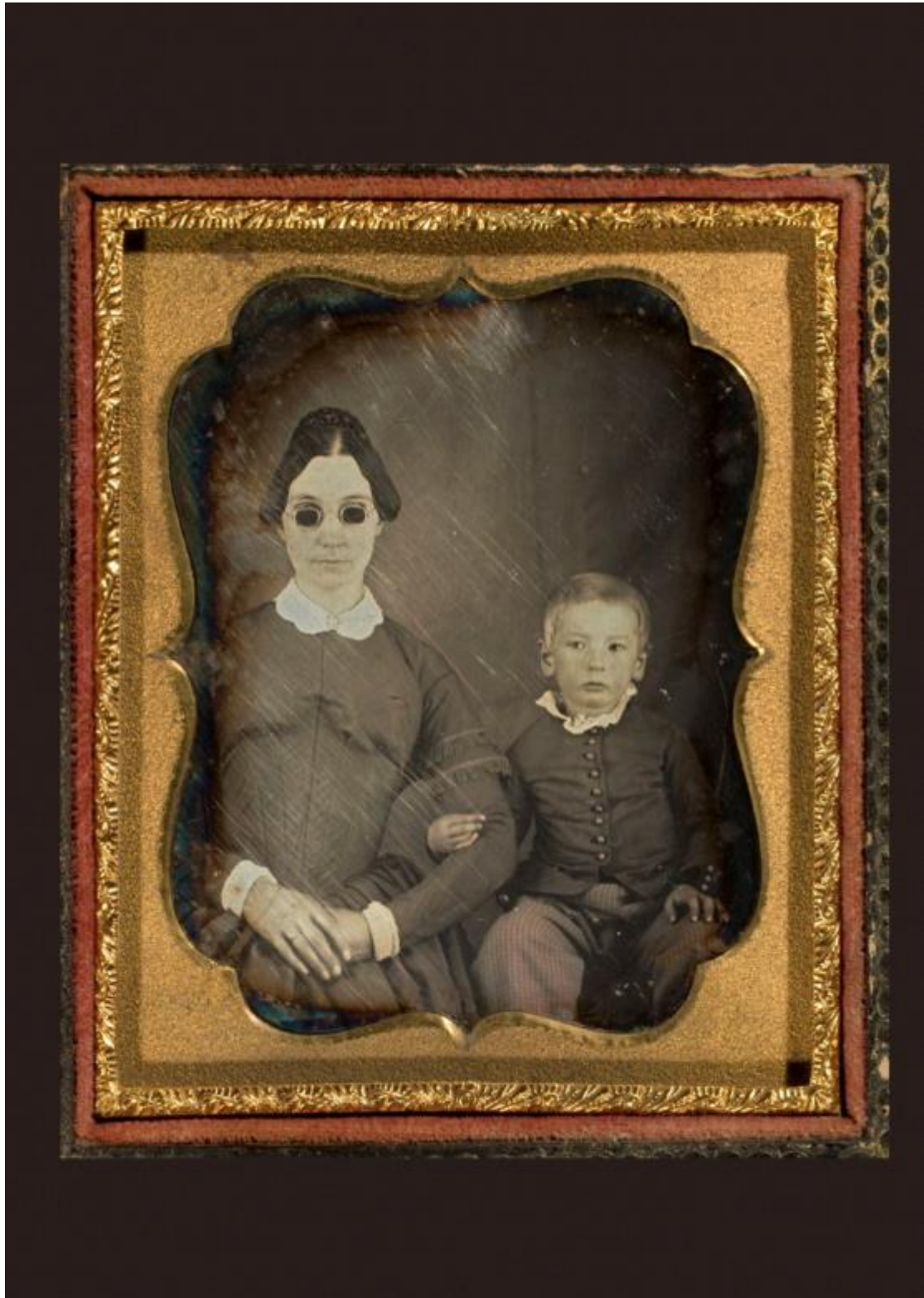
Biographical note:

Shane Strange is a doctoral candidate in Writing at the University of Canberra where he also tutors and lectures in writing and literary studies. His research interests include creative labour and cultural work; subjectivity and creative practice and cultural representations of the city. He is a writer of essays, short fiction and creative non-fiction who has been published widely in Australia. In 2010 he was an Asialink Literature Fellow. In 2014 he was a contributor to and co-editor of the book *Creative Manoeuvres: Writing, Making, Being* (Cambridge Scholars Press).

Keywords:

Ekphrasis – found poetry – archive – fragment – writing process

From Found ekphrases, Vol. 1—Frames:



Two black dots

blind glasses: full length portrait of a blind man moving

blind glasses : young woman sending a romantic blow kiss

blind glasses : a small boy waiting at the window

blind glasses : close-up of a young man wearing sunglasses

Elsewhere in the city, the woman with dark glasses – revealed
to be:

the Japanese man,

the car thief,

and the young boy.

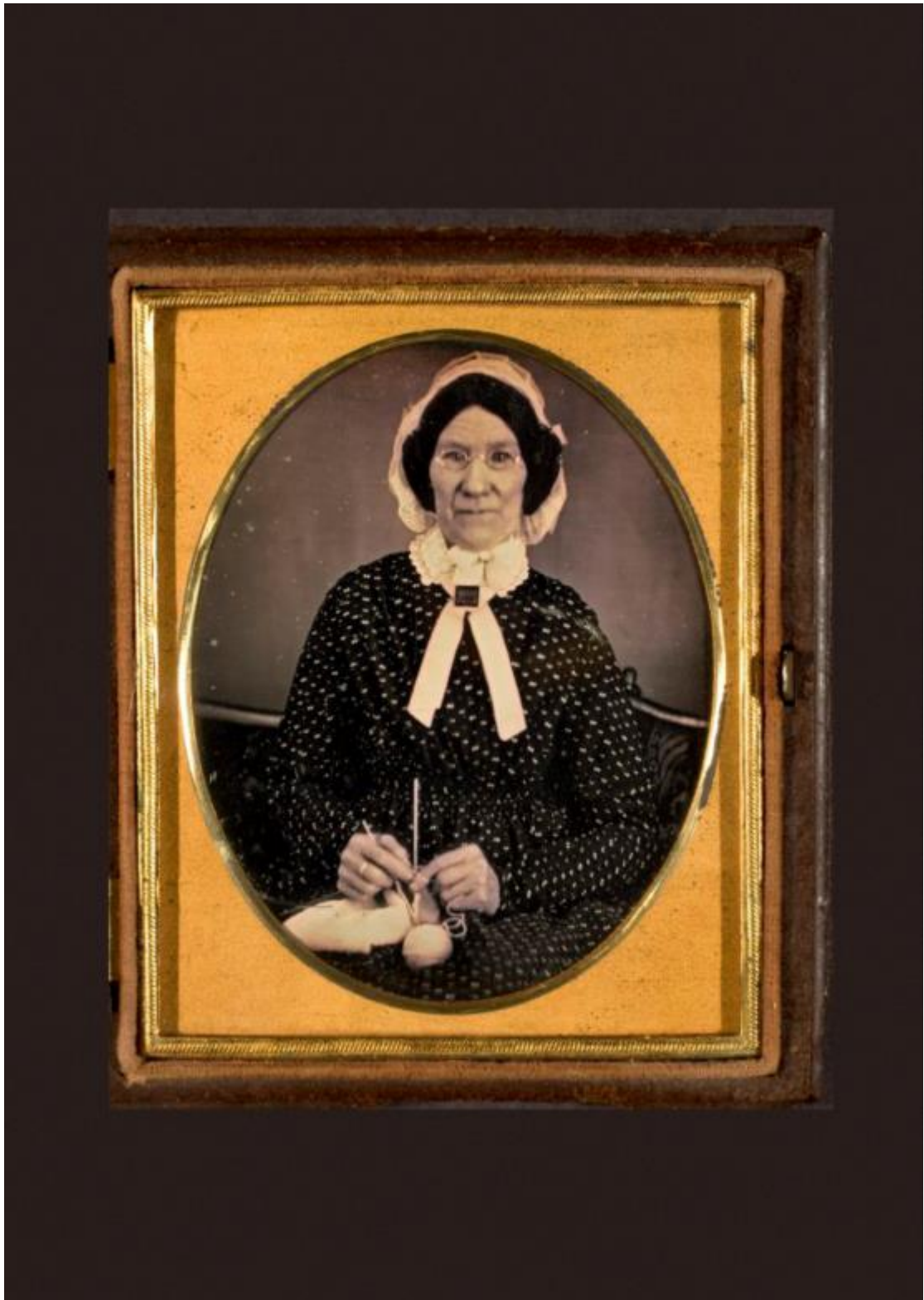
Oh, pretty woman

like a traffic light, or a mother

pushing her baby across the street in a stroller.

Looking into the mirror,

two black dots for eyes stare back.



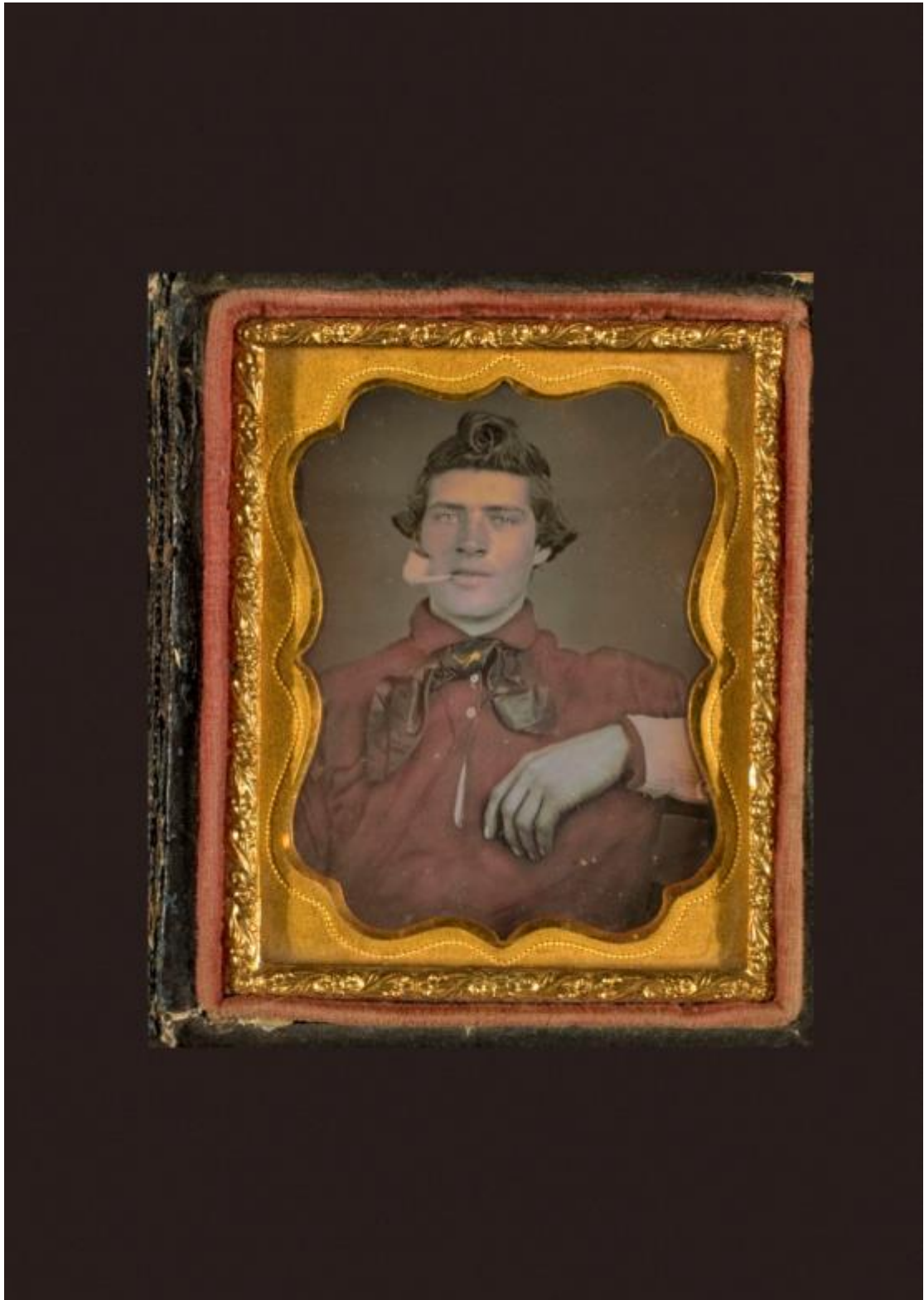
Knives in pockets

Stack of three books,
with yarn and knitting needle, a cane.
Purple cap pulled over her head,
frock slung over bony shoulders.
Of specific age,
but unspecified identity,
seated in her chair,
knitting.

Specifics are sharp and often very comic.
Say that she was the mother of the unidentified
Baby found twenty-two years before.
The terror, you know.
For women inmates were taught embroidery,
knitting and tailoring: a knife
in each pocket.

Needles are tiny and easy
to drop and lose.
Matter echoing the protracted
process of losing – driving
nails through the palms.

With designs as intricate as those on her hand,
two trenches have been dug for the unidentified bodies.



Smoke

The purchase of an ale entitled
a man to a smoke. Sometimes,

being able to scrape a hard chair up
to a lunch table. Beside the fire

were the pipe and the pouch
of smoking tobacco. He saw smoke

coming from the pipe though
he had not lighted it. “Silly boy, keep
your shirt on,” she teased.

They painted their bodies with clay:
red from the dust and the clay
and the sun, into the air.
Red for war and contests.

Now he has everything in
its place, you cannot offend him.



Hands

An intensely personal moment.

What do you need to know?

If one person is a bit stale, two people

are perfect. Two people –

age: mature adult;

gender: both male.

They hold hands, but don't say anything to each other.

Both men looking out into what they share: the isolation.

Zoom way in on the subject's face, eye,

or hands.

Not hovering over paper as if about to write,

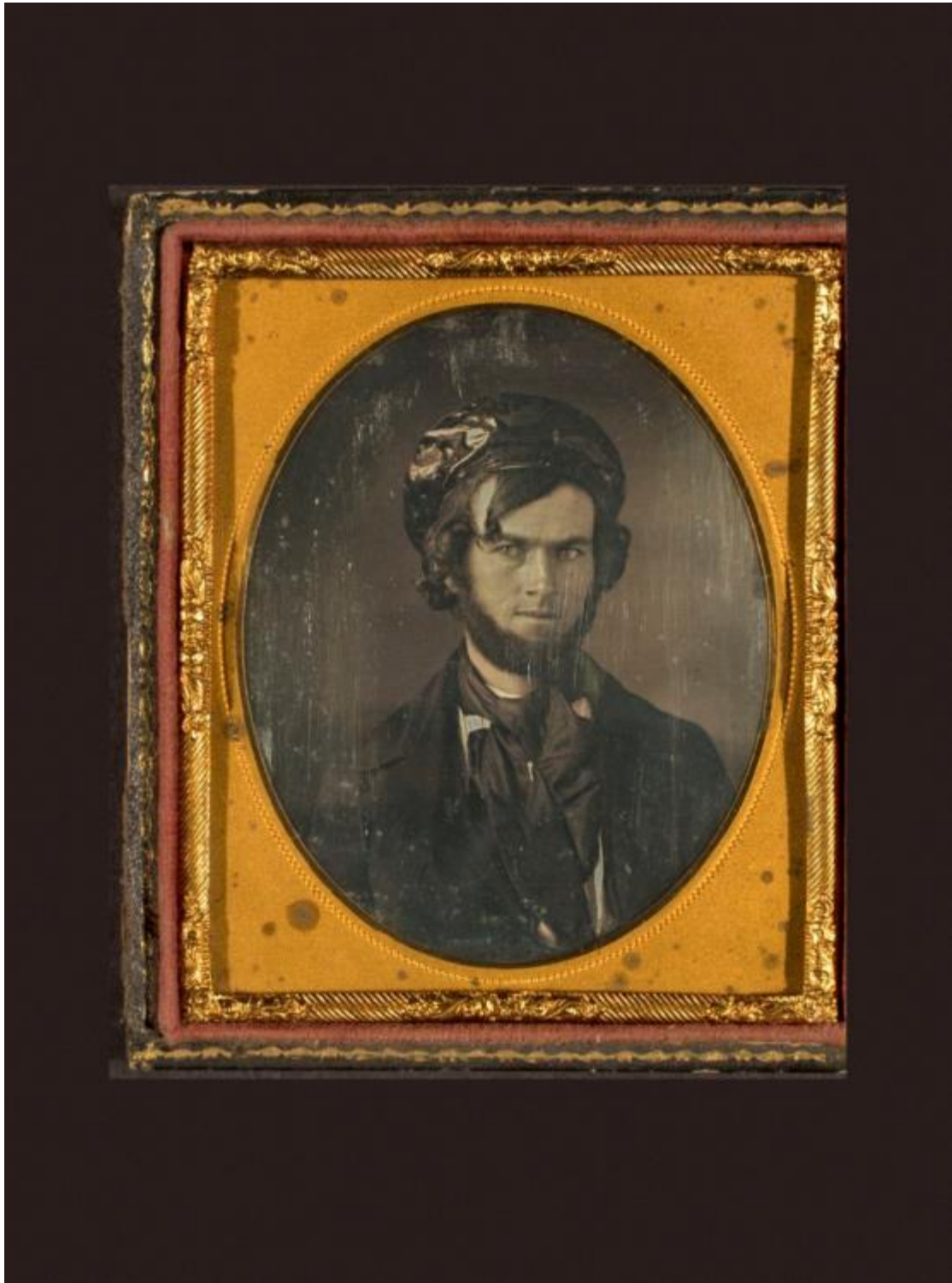
but staring up at the gaping hole left in the North.

Jesus holding a man,

hands in bowl.

Two weeks later, he was in his room,

packing his bags.

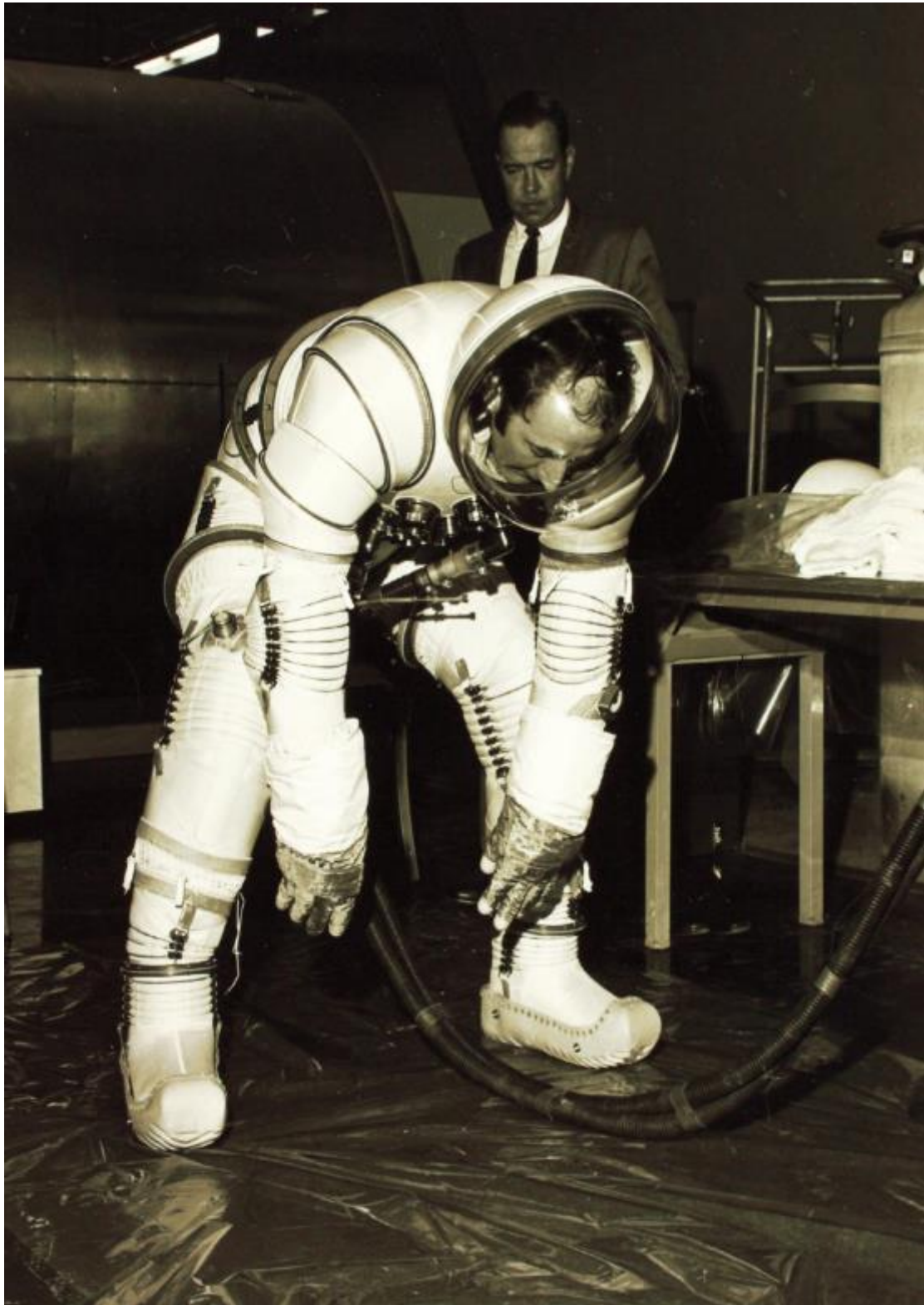


Crown

Man wearing hat wary:
head and shoulders,
eyes slightly right.
Uneasy lies the head
that wears a crown wary, wearing ,
white, whites,
black, blacks,
the wondering young,
and the practical old.

And if another man makes mention of it,
the hat looks ridiculous.

From Found ekphrases, Vol. 2—Space



DUTY

During the next two months,
the men often spotted
Surov making his lone way as
Krasnin bent down
beside the body of his colleague,
lifted himself on his hands,

and very cautiously broke.



CONSOLE

These stages are useful
for fixing broken concepts:
make an explosive entrance;
activate the mainframe;
install new fuses;
add new footsteps;
come up like thunder.

Now stop.

Mark the passage of time
by the turning of the seasons.

Research statement

In his essay ‘Self-extraction’, Ross Gibson suggests that ‘new creation comes not from some *urwelt* where every-originating inspiration burns, but from the everyday world where all that is extant is ready for re-fashioning’ (2014: 9). Gibson goes on to suggest that this ‘re-fashioning’ might take the form of a ‘translation from cognitive mode to cognitive mode’ or ‘the practice of glossing one mode of expression with another mode’ (2014: 12). For Gibson, this is an *ekphrastic* manoeuvre, a modification of the traditional meaning of ekphrasis as writing (poetry) about art – to encompass other forms of making where one art form translates from another, or combines in various ways to form a new art work.

In this series of images and poems, I combined this modified version of the ekphrastic with the conceptual writing practice of found poetry. Conceptual writing practices, as Kay Rozynski suggests: ‘focus[es] critical attention on the writing process rather than or in addition to the resulting text’ (2014: 97). John Robert Colombo, suggests found poetry has:

[a]n especially valuable function of found art and found poetry in particular is its ability to make us respond aesthetically to the universe around us, not just to those separate parts of the world called works of art. It is possible to act as if the universe itself were an immense piece of art, a collage perhaps (Colombo n.d.).

Our current ‘everyday’ is inextricably overlaid with a digital realm as ubiquitous as it is opaque. To both exploit and foreground this, I found readily available online archives of images – this case the Eastman House archive and the NASA archive from

the flickr Commons – a worldwide collaborative repository of images from notable museums and institutions (www.flickr.com/commons). Finding arresting images, I transposed the recorded title of each of these images (often a simple line on what the image portrayed) into the Google search engine which returned not only multiple search results, but fragments of text harvested from the relevant websites, separated by ellipsis. These tantalising fragments offered odd and surprising conjunctures between the photograph and text, and between various pieces of text as they are ‘found’ from the search engine. Together these constructions (picture and text) offer a significant way of combining two traditions of poetry that are seemingly incompatible: the translative ‘re-fashioning’ as suggested by Gibson’s ekphrastic manoeuvre and found poetry’s conceptual employment of the everyday that foregrounds the process and techniques of writing.

List of works cited

Colombo, John Robert ‘On found poetry (a found introduction)’ *Ubu web*, at http://www.ubu.com/papers/found_poetry.html (accessed 12 October 2015)

Gibson, Ross 2014 ‘Self extraction’ in Shane Strange, Hetherington, Paul, & Webb, Jen (eds) *Creative Manoeuvres: Writing*, Newcastle-Upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 1–17, at <http://www.myilibrary.com?id=636758> (accessed 30 March 2015)

Rozynski, Kay 2014 ‘Spectral bodies of thought: a materialist feminist approach to conceptual writing’, in S Strange, Hetherington, Paul, & Webb, Jen (eds) *Creative Manoeuvres: Writing*, Newcastle-Upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 91–106, at <http://www.myilibrary.com?id=636758> (accessed 30 March 2015)