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Picture Words: toward an art-critical methodology

Abstract

“*Phiction: Lies, Illusion and the Phantasm in Australian Photography*” is a curatorial experiment in assembling a survey exhibition from a significant collection. Its formulation, presentation and the outcomes of its tour of eleven regional and metropolitan Victorian galleries provide a case study for this paper. The exhibition *Phiction* (the title amalgamates *photography* and *fiction*) challenges audiences’ reading of photographs, and confronts some curatorial assumptions, by juxtaposing the images with extracts of Australian fiction instead of the usual gallery fact sheet, list of provenance or expert gloss. In this way the exhibition forces a confrontation between ‘dumb’ image and ‘blind’ text and while examples are examined, a review of the exhibition is not the purpose of this paper. A consideration its process and effect is discussed in the paper to propose a comparative tool in the study, investigation and evaluation of art. It is offered to visual art school researchers, lecturers and students contemplating the most appropriate and effective, or alternative, methodologies to employ. With reference to the dominant systems of critique which have come to us from other disciplines, the paper considers the art practitioner’s perspective by drawing on the example of *Phiction* to pose the open question; “How might we use one artform to explore another?”.

Biography

James McArdle is an artist whose area of research is the difference between human perception and camera “vision”, concentrating on focus and binocular vision. His practice exploits this difference for expressive and aesthetic purpose and he has exhibited since 1974, most recently in 2002/2003 at Bendigo and Horsham Regional Art Galleries. He has regularly presented papers related to this research at national and international conferences. He is currently part time Senior Lecturer in PhotoPrintMedia at La Trobe University Bendigo coordinator of Postgraduate studies, and concurrently is senior partner in a freelance photography business specialising in fine art reproduction, photojournalism and corporate work. He has twenty years experience in art education and administration at a tertiary level that includes positions at Victoria University (Prahran, now Victorian College of the Arts), RMIT, and Monash and La Trobe Universities. He has also lectured in private institutions (Council of Adult Education, Photography Studies College, and the Australian College of Photography, Art and Communication). He has curated exhibitions of photography including the currently touring “*Phiction: Lies Illusion and the Phantasm in Photography*” and “The Edge” which brought together contemporary photojournalistic and documentary images of deviance and transgression from South Africa. He is completing a PhD at RMIT.

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“Words represent images: nothing can be said for which there is no image.

Fredrick Sommer in collaboration with Stephen Aldrich in “Poetics of Space” p.187-196

In a conference that brings together lecturers from University art and design courses, the purpose of this paper is to extrapolate from a personal experience which is one that you may have yourself, that of curating an exhibition, to propose a possibility for a comparative tool in the study and investigation of art.

Most likely it was my position as Lecturer in Photography and familiarity with my practice, that prompted Merle Hathaway, director of the Horsham Regional Art Gallery to ask me to assemble photographs from their collection for a touring exhibition. Our proposal successfully attracted a Victorian Government grant to tour the exhibition to eleven regional and metropolitan galleries. The role of curator (and I don’t claim the status of ‘professional’ curator), I understand as ‘to care’, and to find some means to encourage others to care, about the art placed in our charge. The starting point was to select representative images from the collection of more than 2,000. Horsham Regional Art Gallery specialises in the collection of diverse examples of Australian photography to the point where its holdings are larger than most metropolitan institutions. Some are documentary or photojournalistic, not all have an artistic intent.

The exhibition was going to a range of galleries with a general audience. In seeking a common thread by which to draw together the works for the show I decided to exploit two clichés. “The camera never lies” assumes photographs are documentary and factual. “One picture is worth a thousand words” is so exacting a formula that it begs to be questioned since it assumes that some quantifiable exchange can be made of words with pictures. The phrase was

coined by a pioneer of images in advertising, Fred R. Barnard (Barnard 96). It is significant that he subsequently inflated his original equation to "One picture is worth *ten* thousand words" in 1927. It also declares an inter-change between pictures and words, which is something else, and *that* is what I'd really like you to consider.

The problem of the equivalence between word and image has been exhaustively disputed, not least by the semioticians

[W]e still do not know exactly what pictures are, what their relation to language is, how they operate on observers and on the world, how their history is to be understood, and what is to be done with or about them. (Mitchell 11)

This paper is not a review of 'Phiction: Lies, Illusion and the Phantasm in Photography', which would be a pointless exercise in self-congratulation or flagellation. Also I am a photographer and not a semiotician. Instead I will draw from the presentation of works from *Phiction* (the title amalgamates *photography* and *fiction*) and emphasise the way we might read photographs, using some correspondence between the meaning contained in a photograph and that transmitted, for instance, by 'a thousand words', which is roughly the amount contained in a long newspaper feature or a very short story. I want to extrapolate from that to pose an open question; "How might we use one artform to explore another?"

We are used to seeing photographs accompanied by text or captions, but where is there any point of comparison between text and image? *Phiction* tests the connection in three ways.

First, in this exhibition, texts accompany the images which are not the usual gallery fact sheet, list of provenance nor curatorial gloss, but exclusively small extracts from Australian fiction, most not even two hundred words long. The use of these novels and stories here is intended to encourage and challenge the viewer to question the image. The largest part of my work as a curator was to seek out from memory of my own reading, texts which seemed to connect with the images.

Secondly, *Phiction* presents images that are not easily explained and challenge the viewer for interpretations. Many are illusionistic, some deliberately lie, pretending to be something they are not, some even are apparitions. Their fictionality readily challenges the old saw "The camera never lies".

Lastly, no text and image pair is an exact 'fit' since none of the writers intended their writing as a caption, and none of the photographers were illustrating the text. In this way the exhibition forces a confrontation between the 'dumb' image and the 'blind' text. Such lack of exact correlation prompts the viewer to substitute it for their own reading to decide for themselves if photographs are lies, illusions or phantasms. Surveys of visitors to the exhibitions of *phiction* have been made at nine venues to date across urban and regional Victoria. Invariably, whether they be students from across the range primary to tertiary, or members of the public, there is universally a readiness to take issue with the connection between each image and its 'caption'. From audiences making such considerations come many questions about intentionality and aesthetic merit in both photograph and printed word. The important question here is; "What more might a process of comparison texts and images, or images and performance, or a dialogue of works from any of the artforms, contribute as a methodology in Art and Design courses?". That is to say that while here I may limit my comparison to photographs and works of fiction, I propose that much of value may come when Visual Art students and researchers undertake such comparative studies.

It was my aim to suggest that photography is a form of language and of writing. Of course the visitors to this exhibition almost certainly have made and used photographs for themselves and therefore fulfil the well-known prophecy made in 1936 by Laszlo Moholy-Nagy: "The illiterate of the future will be the person ignorant of the use of the camera as well as of the pen." (Moholy-Nagy quoted in Traub 23)

Often used as a mnemonic, a means of assisting our fading memories, photograph is 'the mirror with a memory', the Kodak moment in the family album. Sometimes our only recollection of an event is the photograph. Might the photograph even be used to



supplant memory, replacing it with something that has equal veracity, but in fact being a persuasive fiction, an 'implanted memory'? In an exhibition dealing with images which deliberately mislead or puzzle the viewer we can see that photography allows the possibility of 'constructing' a revelation; a moment when the viewer's memory is altered to include an episode created by the narrative union of 'found' text and 'real' photographs. For any photographer the problem, and the beauty, of the medium is its capacity to leave things out. It is ready-made for the 'little white lie', the one where you leave something that may incriminate you unsaid. Somewhere out of frame, offstage, the moment before or after the photograph was taken lies a truth that the photographer prefers to replace with their own version.

Cinema, a narrative comprising the spoken word and moving image, might be a useful comparator. Its flow of narrative follows only the arrow of time. Presenting still images with text allows reflection between images and other images, between images and text. It allows the possibility of reordering the reading.



Carlo Golin's sequence of photocopies (1999) headline the invitations for "Phiction" and are a useful entrée. They are letters in presented in a medium that is normally used to duplicate the words of other authors. Here one letter is given at a time. But they are more than letters. They are copies of photographs of letters that exist somewhere in three dimensions, perhaps they appeared on the wall of an Art Deco cinema. Most likely they were not originally in the sequence 'O', 'N', 'C' and 'E' but assembling them in this order Golin suggests a story about these corroded letterforms. A simple narrative, it is the story that begins, as long ago we used to hear, "Once Upon a Time..." that trails off, leaving us with the onus of providing a history for these lost letters. In the exhibition Barry Humphries' story deals also with a sequence of letters:

"One night in about 1943 I heard them playing 'Sweet Spirit', a psychic parlour game in which I was never allowed to participate. An alphabetical circle was arranged on the table top and everyone put their finger on an upturned glass in the middle. They all took it in turns to ask the spirit questions, and there were always crescendos of laughter followed by, 'Shhh, you'll wake the children.' My father was regularly reproached for cheating. One night I heard a voice, I think it was Auntie Dorothy's, ask the spirit when Cliff Jones, Phyllis's brother, was coming home on leave, and there was a strange silence in the room as the glass, carrying everyone's fingers with it, darted from N to E to V to E to R. They never played that game again." (Humphries 97)

In the photograph, as in the text, the letters are a loaded quotation and this similarity emphasises the differences. Photographs reveal, show, appear; words describe, narrate, announce. There is a difference in their import, in the freight of their contents, in their intelligence. Paul Cezanne was referring to painting when he famously said Art "first of all is optical. That's where the material of our art is: in what our eyes think." Photographs also come from the eyes.

Words are read in sequence. Photographs can be taken in by the eye all of a piece, for which they may compose 'para-frames' in sub-clauses. They might present for instance, in one image, a shattered wall with a window on nothing, a blurred dog, the rusted iron fence around a grave. Trevor Kenyon's photograph of the 'Old Mission' (1979) allows that these components, though seen all at once, may be connected with each other in several



permutations. The meaning of this photograph is a sum of these parts, an equation we make for ourselves within the bracket of his framing. We are provided with alternatives for the very environment of this image. Will the propped wall fall away to reveal lush forest, or to the stark sky that the window frames? Which is the true time scale of this image? That of the departing dog or that which ages with the grave? Set against this is the neatly punctuated clauses from Colleen McCulloch's "The Thorn Birds" which pace out the memorials and mounds in Drogheda station graveyard:

"But perhaps a dozen less pretentious plots ringed the mausoleum, marked only by plain white wooden crosses and white croquet hoops to define their neat boundaries, some of them bare even of a name: a shearer with no known relatives who had died in a barracks brawl; two or three swaggies whose last earthly calling place had been Drogheda; some

sexless and totally anonymous bones found in one of the paddocks; Michael Carson's Chinese cook, over whose remains stood a quaint scarlet umbrella, whose sad small bells seemed perpetually to chime out the name Hee Sing, Hee Sing, Hee Sing, a drover whose cross said only TANKSTAND CHARLIE HE WAS A GOOD BLOKE; and more besides, some of them women."

Text and image illuminate each other because they share not only imagery but phraseology.

In asking "But isn't a photographer who can't read his own pictures worth less than an illiterate?" (Benjamin 199), Walter Benjamin reminds us that photographers themselves use words to explain, describe or title their images. When left to the fine art photographer the shared sense between image and title, most often noun phrases, is left deliberately enigmatic, as in "The Fall of the Shadow", "The Ascent", "The Harmed Circle", or "Patterns of Connection". "Embraceable You" leaves us looking for the beloved, only to find that there are two sets of arms and one body. These titles, in their provocative mystification, would be equally fit for poems, and like the titles of poems are themselves figures of speech, or images.

The titles of documentary images reflect their indexical nature, mapping for us "Vale Street", the "Old Mission, Victoria", or "Cox and Rizzetti Foundry, Melbourne", characterising "Young Couple with Torana", or explaining "Imprisoned in Ice, January 1915". However some titles deliberately confuse the conventions and we should beware of categorising "Corrugated Iron Fence with Hole" when it turns out to be less concerned with surface appearances than with the metaphoric void of the hole.



Likewise, Frank Hurley's "Imprisoned in Ice, January 1915", an iconic representation of the doomed Shackleton Expedition ship *Endurance* is more than document, a metaphoric double-take that let's us see the expeditioners' vision of their vessel in the high waves made futile as the billows freeze solid. It is full of artifice in its mannered composition, and this sits among a body of prints in which Hurley recombines several views of the ship, skies and ice in ever more dramatic montages that elaborate the event, though here such artistry is restricted to the blue-toned carbon print. Seventy year's later comes another stranding in Glenda Adam's novel;

"I wish I had a camera?" said Donna, her voice muffled by her scarf. Lark stopped crying and sat beside her. The tears were still wet on her cheeks, her eyes were fixed on the ship. "They're going to leave us behind."

"I'd reckon we have about two hours until the reef is covered and we can't stand any more?" said Donna. As she spoke, the water was lapping again at their toes and soon was covering their feet.

"Like those galloping tides in England?" said Donna chattily. "The shore is so flat that the sea just rushes in at high tide, like a train. People are always drowning, trying to run away from it. You have to somehow not fight it, but go with it, go with whatever is pushing at you, in order to master it."



They stood up and picked their way to what appeared to be the highest part of the reef. Donna had now let her glass bowl go and was leading Lark. Even at the highest point the water was at their ankles, rising steadily.

Adam's text and Hurley's image share more than a common theme. The episode in "Walking On Coral" is literally pivotal, positioned at the exact centre of the book in demonstrating symmetrical changes in the lives of all protagonists. It is the artifice of both works that makes them iconic.

We expect our curiosity about journalistic images to be mollified by a caption rather than a mere title which is intended to whet our appetite for an accompanying article. Significantly such captions as "Fierce Storm Strikes Horsham" are in the same non-progressive present as photography itself.



Included in the exhibition are newspaper images from Ian Ward, self-taught press photographer with The Wimmera Mail-Times, Horsham's local paper. Both images are typical of his conscientious approach, rare amongst Australian regional newspaper photographers. Lifted off the newsprint, and presented by Ward with new 'Art' (noun phrase) titles for the exhibition they become strange images that prompt astonishment at strange truths, a puzzle that demands solution. Such a 'puzzle test' should be applied to any photojournalistic image. A tight vertical composition, reinforced by a witty directional arrow which is a galvanised shed, adds a figurative megaton to the explosive force of 'Lift Off'. A puzzle with explosive consequences are at the centre of Murray Bail's "Eucalyptus: A Novel".

The written equivalent of the portrait is the biography. If portraitists would present us with their subjects' life story they remain aware that a photograph extracts a mere moment from that story, so that the portrait photograph which has been linked so often to mortality, is like the corpse of its subject, or more like its elaborate sarcophagus. How can this be when it is so easy to believe in the life in these photos? The act of portrayal through photography is close to death in that it is like a eulogy, but it is at the same time a conversation. Robert Billington's 'Young Couple With Torana' (1992) speak to us, and at the same time as being represented, are enacting themselves.



The nineteenth century concept that 'every face tells a story' is true insofar as we accept that it is a story and that the representation can be honest or dishonest, portrayal or betrayal. Where the written biography and the portrait differ is in the ease with which the biographer intervenes. Beyond the likeness, in a photograph, the 'moral dimension' becomes a visual exchange using as currency all the metaphor that can be assembled in the image. In this way, what starts as a document becomes a contract between sitter and photographer and ends up looking as much like fiction as a 'predictive' biography, if there might be such a thing.

Here are other arresting images of people's faces, by Bill Henson, Julian Smith and Joyce Evans. But do they pretend at portraiture? The majority of the images in this exhibition come from the period from mid 1970's to the 1990's when the medium was gaining ascendancy in the visual arts in Australia. I think the very moment where we can see this happening is in

1975 as the young woman in Carol Jerrems' triple portrait gazes into our eyes, barefaced against the late afternoon light, while her companions hang back watchfully in the shadows. She would be candidly at home, it seems, amongst the cinema verite cast of Helen Garner's novel 'Monkey Grip' (1977) and indeed she coexisted in the same Melbourne. Both image and book purport to an autobiographical honesty on the part of the authors. However, this woman and her dark companions are co-conspirators with Jerrems in forging what would seem to be another document in the by then mannerist manifestation of the street photograph, a form pursued with particular vigour by Jerrems in her edgy series on the 'skinheads'. The woman Catriona Brown is an actor who posed for Jerrems' 'Vale Street' (1975) and the men, whom Brown had never met before, were members of the skinhead gang, some of whom, it is said, had once raped Jerrems. The photographer was inspired by working at the time with director Paul Cox on his early films. This Arbus-like confrontation is part fiction, the extract that accompanies the photograph here is from Helen Garner's celebrated story which is part autobiography. Both the novel and the photograph move art, through feminism's "left field", into post-modern reinvention. Photography was the medium that took a leading role in bringing this new sensibility to prominence in Australian art practice.

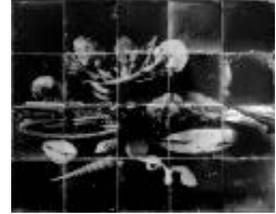


"Our house was full again, people home from holidays, but the summer still standing over us. We climbed the apricot tree in the hack yard and handed down great baskets full of the small, imperfectly shaped fruits. Georgie made jam. Javo and I sat in the sun on the concrete outside the back door, cracking the apricot stones with half bricks to get the kernels out. I was learning how to

reach him without talking, though sometimes I was afraid he hadn't understood. We talked about this, lying on my bed with our bare legs under and over.

'Don't worry,' he said. 'I like the way you love me. I feel comfortable in it.'" [Garner]

Deliberate fabrications or confections range from an emulsion on metal assemblage by Ewa Narkiewicz, through Chris Barry's rephotographed collage to the seamless photomontage of Peter Lyssiotis. A fabrication is a lie but alternatively a construction, a 'built' image. The texts selected to accompany these images are fragments, just as the photographs are particles of time. PhICTION is a montage in which two artforms, the Australian novel and the Australian photograph overlap and invite direct cross-reference.



An artist having works isolated for exhibition risks misrepresentation. Leah King-Smith had strong words, which illuminate the problematic of conflating photograph and fiction, and her words were substituted for the original 'found' text;

"The artist believes that the curatorial agenda of this exhibition is inappropriate if not oppositional to her work. Her signature use of multi-layering is a means of addressing the multi-dimensional quantum nature of reality, not the deceptive, non-existent or fearful nature of reality that the exhibition title and brief suggests." (King-Smith email)

In fact it was the incorporation of this King-Smith in an earlier show that I curated that provided the inspiration for "Phiction: Lies Illusion and the Phantasm in Photography". Literally, the reflection into this appropriated historical photograph is one of King-Smith's own landscapes and we are left looking into multiple layers, through history. The multilayering creates an illusion that contains its own disclosure. If we look through it we will find in the old photograph a truth about a repression that is at the heart of our country, if we accept the illusion it looks 'merely' beautiful.

What would be an appropriate text for this important image? Might finding one provide us with more insight than a direct and conventional interpretation, analysis or deconstruction?



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