



# Art/Photography

BLAIR FRENCH

Preparing a small selection of my essays on photography for a book publication over recent months has given me cause to both review how I have come to the positions upon the state of photographic practice and related discourse in Australia expressed in a range of essays for *Broadsheet* in recent years, and to test them again.<sup>1</sup> The essays I have been reviewing span almost eight years, but are clustered most densely in the period 2002–2005. These are the years immediately following the completion of a doctoral thesis,<sup>2</sup> in which I sought to survey and define the conceptual models that photography had brought into contemporary art; assess the efficacy of the associated critical models; and attempt some application of my thinking to selected bodies of work in Australian practice over the period 1992–2002. When I began that study in 1999, my concern was with trying to unpick the forms of relationship between the dominant large-scale museum art models of 1990s photo-based contemporary art and the cultures they pictured and attempted to encapsulate within their massive image fields. This led to a particular interest in how artists working with photographic images sought to engage social and material experience through photography's close association to our understandings of reality and the real.

At the core of that academic work I identified what I termed seven key tendencies within dominant or most visible modes of photo-based contemporary art. First, the predominantly transcriptive character of the photographic image as utilised by contemporary artists. Second, the tendency towards concentration upon the singular photographic image as the complete form of the work of art itself. Third, the apparently ever-more seamless, hermetic compositional forms of photographic images within contemporary art, enabled by increasingly sophisticated imaging technologies. Fourth, the appearance of the photographic image as a space in which the world is organised and thus produced in infinite variations. Fifth, the utilisation of the photographic image in contemporary art as a means of direct access to material, social, imaginative and psychological experience. Sixth, the deployment of the photographic image as an arena for the pictorial staging of contemporary social relations and discursive conditions of art. And seventh, the strong relationship between photographic images within and as contemporary art to other image forms and contexts (including documentary photography, the photo-essay, historical 'ethnographic' photography, conceptual art, advertising and fashion photography, the cinema, film, and television). While I would argue that these still hold to greater or lesser degrees, it would be fair to say that some of the tendencies I was identifying were most strongly associated with practices of the mid to late 1990s. Certainly, by the time I had completed that study in 2003 dramatic changes in the conditions of photography as both a contemporary art practice and a defining platform of popular visual culture in Australia were already apparent.

In response to this, and spurred by the desire to write more fluidly and in forms more immediately responsive to the activity of art, I began that short series of essays for *Broadsheet*. In these essays I have attempted to apply some the thoughts I had developed within an academic context to discussions of the positioning of practices by an emerging generation of practitioners within a generally disengaged critical culture, or worse a culture openly hostile to critical questioning and self-reflection—a culture characterised by anti-intellectualism and driven by the desire for market validation.

Although I had written a great deal about photography previously, in many senses these essays for *Broadsheet* have come to constitute my most thorough public engagement with photography from the position of an independent critic. The implied freedoms of that position are probably only now, in retrospect, becoming apparent to me. For more generally, I have tended to come at photography from a number of professional perspectives. My first significant engagement with photography and photo-based contemporary art in Australia came when I joined the Australian Centre for Photography in early 1996 as program manager, a role that included curatorial functions and that of managing editor of *Photofile*. This was just a matter of weeks before the Australian Centre for Photography reopened with new gallery spaces. It was also a time at which there was still some residual sense of concern apparent within various members of photographic communities—particularly those committed to traditional understandings of street photography, social documentary and modernist photographic formalism—regarding the Australian Centre for Photography's continued deep involvement with contemporary art. Although founded within and by an early-1970s milieu focused upon modernist understandings of both art and documentary photography, the Australian Centre for Photography had become central to the development of various constructed, appropriationist, socially activist and theoretically rhetorical practices highly influential within the field of contemporary art (more generally in Australia from the early 1980s onwards).<sup>3</sup> In some quarters divisions were perceived to run deep. The entrenched nature of certain perceptions made this a difficult environment to enter and to negotiate positively.<sup>4</sup> My attempts to think across photography more broadly as a curator, incorporating documentary-based work with more contemporary photomedia practice (including burgeoning moving-image work) had little flow-on effect in bridging divisions that were themselves often reforming and repositioning in relation to different matters of material form, subject matter or conceptual approach.

Given this, it is interesting that almost a decade later, the terms upon which such divisions were assumed have themselves been eroded by a typically early twenty-first century 'third way' generated out of a coalition between the overwhelming presence of photography across all spheres of life and cultural activity—the ultimate success of photography as the dominant

structure within mass visual culture—and the broader forces of globalisation. I would argue that in the face of the flattening out of all photographic practice to an amorphous mass of imagery assessed simply in terms of visual attraction and content, the issue of whether any single image is based in 'traditional'—modernist—photographic practices or in post-conceptual contemporary art practices, when treated in isolation is in and of itself irrelevant. Rather, the proper detailed tracing of historical genealogies for examples of contemporary practice needs to underpin a further process of critical discrimination. It is crucial that this process entails consideration of the image's relationship to the broader representational and cultural economies out of which it emerges and within which it circulates. Unfortunately, however, this quite basic form of critical analysis is resisted by a photographic culture advancing representational homogeneity under the guise of accessibility, responding to an insistent demand for distraction, entertainment and instant representational gratification and in thrall to the spectacle culture of the mass market. To loosely paraphrase and extrapolate from Terry Eagleton in the first chapter of *After Theory*,<sup>5</sup> we might be well characterised as having moved from cultural theory to a culture of pornography; from a culture valuing intellectual self-reflection to one constantly seeking attention and self-affirmation.

With this in mind I want to make brief comment on two new bodies of photographic work have kept returning to the forefront of my thinking in recent months. The first is Lyndal Walker's *Do You Want to Live Forever* (2005) series of colour portraits of young men generally photographed posed casually (if often uneasily) in their underwear within their domestic environments.<sup>6</sup> The second is Tim Silver's *Untitled (killing me softly) (version 2)* (2005/06) set of photographs.<sup>7</sup>

In effect they exemplify two key directions of current photo-based contemporary art practice that I concentrated upon in my writing in recent years. In the case of Walker's work, this takes the form of an uneasy, or perhaps too easy accord between the mass cultural signifiers of class, gender and urban chic and photography's historical impulses towards scrutiny and classification. In Silver's work, on the other hand, we witness a reworking of photography's mutually beneficial marriage of convenience to conceptualism within the framework of late twentieth-century spectacle culture.

In the essays written for *Broadsheet* I have tended to return again and again to the position that such an accord (noted above) between photography as medium of record and photography as ubiquitous form of mass visual culture is often supported by false claims to representational and cultural democracy and accessibility. I have attempted to make the point that my critique here is as directed towards a general culture of critical disengagement within which practice operates, as much as it is the work of individual practitioners. So, for example when



considering Walker's series, I would argue that the intimacy of the work—both counterpointed and concentrated by the clear discomfort in a number of the subjects—tends to lift it from the morass of generic youth culture imagery. It intensifies that element of photography's irrevocable contract with death. Harnessing vestiges of the personal and particular against the flow of time and anticipating in such a focus upon the vulnerability of youth, veiled behind its projection of bravado, Walker's images anticipate the inevitable decay and death of their subjects. The photographs operate in part as memory tokens hedged against the future. In this they are also indicative of another of the key and continuing preoccupations photography holds for us—its complex, often perturbing relationship to time, history and memory.

Above: Tim Silver, *Untitled (killing me softly), version 2.2., 2005/06*  
Photo courtesy the artist and GRANTPIRRIE, Sydney  
Opposite: Lyndell Walker, *Jamie, in Time, Time is Gone, 2006*  
Photo courtesy the artist

Walker's work occupies an ambivalent position in relation to highly constructed mass media magazine images of youth—both idealised and edgy—proposing a more immediate, intimate, somehow tender representational approach at the same time as playing into that incessant demand for new images of youth, through which the culture industry perpetually reinvigorates itself. It appears simultaneously as part memorial project, part amateur photo-album (even faux-diary of sexual desire) and part anti-fashion fashion spread for a street publication. It traverses trajectories through the history of photography as an anthropological tool; as a means to survey social groupings; as dominant mode of portraiture through modernity; as a means of memento, both personal and public; and increasingly over the latter half of the twentieth-century as an aesthetic frame driving changing conditions of beauty, desire and glamour. So it treads a fine line (where the ambivalence is most profound), delineating the sense of the aforementioned particularity of the images and the apparent fragility of their subjects—within a photographic register—from a collapse

of all specificity into a kind of flattened out, all-pervasive presence in contemporary culture of photography as lifestyle register; wedded to mass market publishing, global advertising conventions and generic conceptions of international youth culture, all trading on a sort of bored, overtly self-aware, over self-conscious sexuality.

By contrast, Silver's large-scale framed colour photographs picture the decay of one of the artist's trademark and quite extraordinary models—in this case an apparently life-size human figure from the waist up (torso, head, outstretched arms) made from bonded soil. The photographs picture the figure lodged amongst scrubby undergrowth, as if buried, in various states of decay, 'flesh' dropping away to reveal a further bonded soil skeleton, which in turn eventually gives way to the elements, in effect returning to nature. This work is accompanied by

a further photographic series—*Untitled (killing me softly) (version 4)* (2005/06)—similarly depicting the decay of another male figure made from bonded sand, lying on a beach and so subject to erosion by wind and tide. In this case, as with Silver's previous foray into photography, *Untitled (adrift)* (2004), depicting the disintegration of a small model rowboat made from pigment in a pool of water, the photographic prints are modest in scale and operate as a sequential multiple to track material decay through time. By contrast, *Untitled (killing me softly) (version 2)* marks a subtle shift in Silver's interlacing of a post-conceptual material practice with the photographic image. Simply put, the transition in Silver's work is emblematic of a more general shift in the deployment of the photographic image in postconceptual contemporary practice—from photography, as means to document an impermanent, process-based installation, initially to a situation in which the aesthetic structure of that document is commodified within the economy of contemporary art, and then to the inevitable point at which a photographic structure comes to determine the overall project. Silver's phenomenal construction of his earth figure, its location within a bush environment, its decay—all of these can be argued as photographically determined acts. They provide both visual content and signature conceptual 'hook' for seductive, disarming photographs utilising, for example, a range of dramatic camera angles that accentuate the pathos of the work.

While markedly different in their structural deployment of the photographic image, the works of Walker and Silver are linked in the first instance obviously by their respective focus upon the male body, but far more obliquely, yet significantly by an over-whelming sense of decay, entropy, boredom, dissolution, enervation, loss and resignation. Such a link having been proposed, the task of criticism in its most speculative form should then be to ask (or to ask of us)—why are we encountering such an all-pervasive sensibility in the otherwise very different work of two relatively young, highly accomplished artists? Why here and now? Why via photography? And most importantly, does this indicate something of an embedded condition within the relationship between photo-based contemporary art and a broader spectrum of contemporary culture?

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Blair French, *Out of Time: Essays Between Art and Photography*, Adelaide: Contemporary Art Centre of South Australia, 2006

<sup>2</sup> Blair French, 'Picture This: The Photographic Image as Contemporary Art', PhD Thesis, University of Sydney, 2003

<sup>3</sup> For a useful introduction to practices, issues and tensions in this period see Ewen McDonald with Judy Annear (eds), *What is This Thing Called Photography? Australian Photography 1975–1985*, Sydney: Pluto Press in association with the Art Gallery of New South Wales and the Transforming Cultures Research Group, University of Technology, 2000

<sup>4</sup> In some cases preconceptions centering upon my background within art curatorial and academic contexts rather than specifically photographic activity did not make this easier (although I had previously curated a handful of photography exhibitions, most notably a collection-based survey of twentieth-century photography from the USA featuring around one hundred works for the National Gallery of New Zealand in 1991)

<sup>5</sup> See Terry Eagleton, 'The Politics of Amnesia', in *After Theory*, London: Penguin, 2003: 1–22

<sup>6</sup> In my case viewed in the exhibition *If You Leave Me, Can I Come Too? Melancholy and Dissociation in Australian Photomedia Practice*, curated by Bec Dean at the Australian Centre for Photography, March–April 2006

<sup>7</sup> First exhibited at GRANTPIRRIE, Sydney, June–July 2006

