

bill henson

the letter returns

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In by now well-known words, Jacques Lacan once wrote: “The sender receives his own message back from the receiver in reversed form”.¹ It is to speak of the way that it is the effect of our actions that reveals our original intentions in undertaking them. It is the one who responds to them who is their true ‘unconscious’ and who makes clear their meaning in a manner we are unable to. Thus, in Lacan’s famous reading of Edgar Allan Poe’s short story ‘The Purloined Letter’, it is the one who ends up holding the letter, no matter how accidental or inadvertent this seems, who must be understood as its proper addressee, the one for whom it was always intended. And this is the case too in ordinary life. When we gossip about someone and they eventually find out, we are not to blame the person who told them or deny that the hurt we caused was intended by us. Rather, the anger of the subject of our gossip tells us the truth of our motivations in speaking to others. Our unconscious and unadmitted message comes back to us in a circle, so that we realise that we were fundamentally always addressing only ourselves.

It is just this that occurred to photographer Bill Henson when the invitation to his exhibition was sent out by Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney in May this year. Within days, his photographs were front page news when a number of them were seized by police, following complaints concerning their depictions of a naked teenage girl. At this point, Henson received his letter back in reversed form, not merely in the sense that the invitation image was obviously selected, whether by Henson himself or somebody at the Gallery, for its ability to shock, and this was obviously what it caused. In a more profound sense, we would say that the furore that erupted spoke the photographs’ truth, revealed their ‘unconscious’. In other words, it was those who complained about the photos who provided them with their best reading, not insofar as they objected to them and tried to silence them, but like any good analyst, they listened to them and let them speak.

Now what could we mean by this? In what sense would it be possible to argue that a vociferous child protection advocate like Hetty Johnson of Braverhearts offered the best insight into Henson’s photography? How is it that she in a positive sense, not in what she negated of the work but in what she repeated of it, put forward its proper explanation? How is it that an artistic illiterate like her was able to see what was at stake in a way that all those well-credentialed critics who defended the photographs were unable to? And how might we for our part—in at least my spontaneous reaction to the controversy—seek to contest the assumptions of both? How to think about Henson’s photographs without being reduced either to agreeing with the child protection advocates attacking or with the art critics defending them? How to contest both Henson and Henson’s defenders while also opposing those who criticise him for exploiting children, understanding that these two sides have much more in common with each other than what separates them?

What is it in fact that Henson says about his own photography? In interviews, he speaks of his work as dramatising adolescence as the transition between childhood and adulthood, as that moment in life in which we first become aware of the mysteries of the world around us. It is a state that Henson’s critics describe in terms of the vulnerability of his subjects, their being exposed to greater forces both within and outside of them. They are confronted by a vast and indifferent power whose ultimate model is nature. When Henson puts together in his exhibitions images of naked adolescents, distant cloudscapes and urban wastelands, the connecting metaphor is the irrepressibility and incomprehensibility of nature. As novelist David Malouf writes: “[Henson’s photographs] affect us not as records of a pre-existing reality, nor as illustrations of some held view, but with the immediate otherness and mystery, and powerful and puzzling reality, of objects from another nature: that is, as works of art”.² It is a smallness in the face of an overwhelming nature that curator Judy Annear speaks of in terms of “the Romanticist interest in creating an effect of sublimity through the loss of self within nature”,³ although as she emphasises Henson’s version of the sublime is more modern and less nostalgic than that of the Romantics.

In other words, in a doubling we find elsewhere in Henson’s work, art itself is one of those great and mysterious truths that the subjects in his photos are subject to. It is perhaps no exaggeration to say that what we see in Henson’s photographs is his subjects seeing their own photographs of themselves or that what Henson is ultimately photographing is the spectators to his own photographs. It is something like this, I think, that accounts for the overwhelming, indeed almost claustrophobic, discourse of “art” that surrounds the discussion of Henson’s work—not only are the photos themselves seen to be artistically highly wrought, but art itself appears as the very subject of the work. We find this discourse in the critics’ desire to find the signs of traditional fine art in Henson’s technique as part of the justification for counting photography as art, with for example the colour applied like a kind of patina or

make-up to many of his images. But we also find it in the recent controversy in the assertion that because his work is art it cannot be pornography. It is the idea that art allows—or should allow—a space for the contemplation of or reflection upon things we would otherwise find disturbing or confronting. (This argument exists in tension with the equally strong impulse in Henson towards the transcending of the medium in the desire to make the objects in his photographs absolutely real, as though we shared the same three-dimensional space as them.)

Indeed, the sense of overwhelming natural forces is given superb expression and amplitude by Henson—the grainy swirl of the prints, the blurring or shaking of the camera’s focus, the tenebrous shades and gradations of the photos’ development. All these elements work to conjure up a hostile, threatening world that is beyond our grasp, a world of shadows and dimly apprehended forces that lie just beyond the known. But there are also shadows *within* what we see, dark forces crossing the faces and bodies in the photos, producing for reasons we cannot guess states of fear, despair, ecstasy and exaltation. Even the rare moments of self-possession in the photos come to appear mysterious, inexplicable, the effect of something else outside of the image. We have in Henson’s work a definitive image of humanity literally and metaphorically stripped bare, reduced to a primal, presocial, almost Hobbesian state, isolated or clinging together in despairing and disconsolate groups against the encroaching darkness. This is how the notion of adolescence ultimately works in Henson—as a figure for all of us confronted by the overwhelming mystery of the world. We live permanently in state of adolescent yearning and uncertainty, of being continuously formed and deformed. The human is understood as a momentarily cathected collection of impulses, at which their possessor can only gaze with anguish and incomprehensibility. If we were looking for literary equivalents to Henson’s world, it would not be to the usually adduced high-art Thomas Bernhard or W.G. Sebald, but to someone like Michel Houellebecq and his book *Atomized* (although admittedly, in a darker, less Pop Art idiom). In the words of *The New Yorker* critic Peter Schjeldahl, another long-term Henson admirer: “The chemical and mineral world in continuously roiling emulsion with light and darkness is an ultimate symbol for the kaleidoscopic identicalness that so disquiets when Henson discovers it in the human scene... What is that face, breaking our hearts, but a momentary configuration of molecules taking form and changing form and losing form?”⁴

Indeed, as has often been pointed out by the more perceptive commentators on Henson’s work, this contingency or decomposition is doubled by the invariably distant, long-focused gaze onto Henson’s scenes. There is a faraway, unseen point of view of which the characters in the photos are unaware; and even when these characters are photographed close-up (and even when they appear to be looking at us), it is still as though they cannot see us, as though we are protected by the darkness surrounding us. (Undoubtedly the high point of this approach is the *Paris Opera* series of 1990-91.) Again, this distant gaze is not so much directly threatening as it is simply enigmatic, unknowable. It retreats from the scene like an absent God refusing to judge his subjects, withdrawing with it all moral surety or direction. Henson’s figures are alone, with no relation beyond the physical, even to the one who sees them. Sydney’s Art Gallery of New South Wales director Edmund Capon exaggerates a little when he speaks of the images as a “celebration of amorality”, but only a little.⁵

In fact, there is an implicit tension in Henson’s work because at the same time as there is meant to be no indication of any active intervention in the scene, the images are highly shaped by Henson. His bodies adopt a whole series of poses from the history of art; they constitute what has been called a “gestuary”.⁶ It is in the earlier work, like the two hundred and twenty gelatin silver prints of the 1980-82 *Untitled* series, in which Henson picks out a face from a crowd by putting it in focus, that there is much more emphasis on the constructive, individualising power of the camera. It is the camera itself that puts the subject in focus, with the rest of the field, as in the later photographs, a vaguely threatening force or pressure. Or at least, we cannot distinguish the self-focusing or self-absorption we see on the faces there from the external focusing of the camera. The subject is not merely subjected or subjectivised, but self-formation or self-subjectivisation is henceforth indistinguishable from a kind of social apparatus or capture. Henson here, for all of his later distance towards what he calls “critique”,⁷ is undoubtedly influenced by the Foucault-style arguments that were then circulating around photographic discourse in Australia, the notion of a certain “eye of power” that produced self-regulating individuals.

How then, might we summarise Henson’s career? What is the trajectory that connects his earlier work to the later? Against all those who speak of the aesthetic affect of Henson’s work, the mastery and ravishments of his photographic technique—although we must not forget for a moment that these are also a form of discipline wrought against his bodies—we would say that what his career manifests is a very 1990s’ trajectory from Foucault’s analysis

Nude children exhibit shut Print this picture >

Art or something else ... censored images of 12- and 13-year-olds in a canceled exhibition by Australian photographer Bill Henson. The exhibition was scheduled to open at 6pm on Thursday May 22 at Roslyn Oxley9 gallery in Paddington, in Sydney's eastern suburbs.

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It is, of course, this notion of an absolute yet unspecifiable damage that is the one employed by the child protection advocates who range themselves against Henson. It is just this threat of an imminent but undetermined danger through the technological dissemination of images that allows them to turn the child into the defining and unquestionable—that is, post-political—issue of our time. For the child today is the absolute model of politics as bio-politics, that which cannot be sacrificed at any cost, that which can be 'killed' but not 'sacrificed'. And insofar as today we are all *homines sacri* we are also all children, as shown symptomatically by the notion (the problem supposedly facing Henson's models) that some image once taken of us as a child will one day turn up to haunt us on the internet. Everyone is hypothetically at risk with the possibility of pornographic images travelling unchecked all over the world and being seen in limitless contexts, the very fantasy of technological omnipotence itself. It is as though none of us is any more able to choose what to see, hear or think when confronted by the ubiquitousness of the internet. We are just as powerless looking at images as when we appear in them. This innocence or childishness is what must be protected or prolonged at all costs. In the reduction of the social to the biological, we lose all sense of risk, of agency, all sense of the future, of the human project, ultimately of the political.

In other words, for all of the irony of stating this, Henson is photographing the very bodies that the child protection agencies themselves speak in the name of. In his work, we have the same children and the same idea of illimitable but undetermined danger that they seek to protect us from. Or, to put this the other way around, these child protection advocates reveal the hidden side of Henson's art—not that he is in any way a pedophile, but that he shares the same fears as them of the loss of any distinctive human agency as we are turned into a cowering and defenceless animal, overcome by impulses and addictions that we can neither control nor understand. The world that Henson depicts is the same one that the child advocates themselves so obsessively conjure up. In the worst sense, his is a depoliticised art, an art of contemporary bio-power. For all of Henson's and his critics' pointing to the transcendent power of art, in fact for them art is reduced to a sensation, a biological reaction, beyond the power of human thought or theorisation. In effect, the art is nihilist, without any sense of a human destiny, except to maintain us as children in a kind of permanent limbo at the pleasure of an invisible sovereign, without any sense of higher value than the perpetuation of life itself at any cost.⁹

Some two months after the 'Henson Affair', *Art Monthly Australia* decided to intervene in the ongoing furore over Henson's images. It was done, declared the editor in vague and ill-chosen words, in the "hope of restoring some dignity to the debate".¹⁰ The front cover of the issue featured a work by Melbourne photographer Polixeni Papapetrou of her daughter, the rather notably named (in this context) Olympia—the first of several art-historical quotations we would have to consider here. It was a work taken from Papapetrou's 2003 *Dreamchild* series, *Olympia as Lewis Carroll's Beatrice Hatch*, which recreated author of *Alice in Wonderland* Charles Dodgson's c. 1850 image *Beatrice Hatch before the White Cliffs*. Inside the magazine were two other images by Papapetrou, which featured Olympia wearing the artist's mother's jewellery, *Olympia wearing her grandmother's jewellery #1* and *#2* (2001). These images by Papapetrou too provoked great controversy, with accusations that the artist was negligent as a parent for allowing her daughter to be photographed in this way, that she was somehow seeking to cash in on the attention that Henson had received and with calls by politicians and others that the magazine be closed down or at least have its government subsidy withdrawn. Currently, in the wake of the two incidents, the Australia Council has been asked by the federal Arts Minister to draw up protocols governing the depiction of children in art.¹¹

of specific effects of surveillance and power to a still more general analysis of what is known as "bio-power". Undoubtedly, the definitive analyst of contemporary bio-power is the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben, who is best known for his revival of the mediaeval notion of the *homo sacer*, the ultimately disposable individual who remains alive only at the discretion of his sovereign. Here is a passage from Agamben's book *Homo Sacer*, which could serve as a perfect description of those scenes of fear, desolation and disenfranchisement Henson creates, in which the individual remains alone, reduced to bare existence and obscurely oppressed by forces that are ultimately beyond their power to control or understand. (And it is in light of what Agamben is saying that we would want to think of Henson's typical use of the iconography of the crucifixion and deposition—it is to speak of a certain desacralisation, the fall of Christ into the realm of the human.) Agamben writes:

*What confronts us today is a life that as such is exposed to a violence without precedent precisely in the most profane and banal ways. If it is true that the figure proposed by our age is that of an unsacrificeable life that nevertheless becomes capable of being killed to an unprecedented degree, then the bare life of homo sacer concerns us in a special way. Sacredness is a line of flight present in contemporary politics, a line that is as much moving into zones increasingly vast and dark, to the point of ultimately coinciding with the biological life itself of citizens.*⁸

Here, I want to begin by questioning the common art world assumption that works of art, in the words of the editor of *Art Monthly*, are able to "restore some dignity to", that is, participate in, a "debate". It is a discursivity or rhetoricity, the idea that art has essentially a *critical* meaning, that Papapetrou's images with their series of quotations from art history are complicit in. But, as the course of the debate revealed, with its literal misdescription of what was in the images, with the imputation of the wildest motives to their making, with the whole reality as well as fantasy of images being seen in the most divergent contexts, works of art are hardly able to speak for themselves, appearing increasingly powerless as the means of their technological dissemination rapidly increase. Papapetrou's images hardly featured in the debate, but served mostly as an excuse or pretext for what was going to be said anyway. We were never more conscious than during the debate of the "fragility" of the image, of the difficulty of saying what we see or producing a symbolic—mutually agreed-upon, performatively binding—consensus around what we say we see. We had a sense of how little it counts as to what is actually in the image and of indicating to others what is in it. Indeed—this is the second irony of *Art Monthly's* intervention—if we for our part could say what is shown by Papapetrou's Olympia as Beatrice Hatch, we would suggest that it is in fact an implicit critique of Henson's work. For, when we look at Papapetrou's photograph closely, what is it that we see? What is it that the artist is trying to point to or represent? It is not something that, for all of the explicitness or obviousness of the image, is immediately apparent. It is only to be seen if we look carefully into the eyes of the child (which crucially, unlike the Dodgson original, meet those of the viewer). What we see in the eyes of the model, what Papapetrou is trying to figure in her work is, if it can be put it this way, the ultimate obscenity in our culture that which cannot be shown or has no way of being represented (which is why Papapetrou does not depict it as such). It is the love between a mother and her child. What Papapetrou is attempting to photograph in Olympia as Beatrice Hatch is not only her child's look onto her but her look onto her child.

And in the other photographs in *Art Monthly*, in which Olympia is shown wearing her grandmother's, that is, the photographer's mother's jewellery, there is again the same averted, displaced or only indirectly represented relationship between mother and child. In a way, what the photographer is attempting to capture is *herself*, seen in her mother's eyes by photographing her child seen in her own. What she is attempting to express in her work is the idea that the only way of reciprocating the love we receive as a child, which by definition cannot be returned because it precedes who we are, is by bestowing the same love upon another. What Papapetrou is seeking to do in these images is imagine herself looking back at her mother by means of her child looking back at her. There is something quite moving about the unspoken (but not yet quite) reciprocal look of trust with which the daughter looks back at her mother in the images in which she is exposed, as though being assured that what she is doing is alright. There is a very subtle interplay between the innocent look out and the experienced look upon, as though the photographer was seeing herself as a child looking out through her eyes at the adult she will become.

This series of images, as remarked upon in the media, was in fact taken several years before their publication in *Art Monthly*, when the photographer's daughter was much younger. And indeed, one of the intriguing things about Papapetrou's career as her children grow older is that she photographs the gradual *breaking* of the relationship between mother and daughter. If what we see in the passage from Olympia wearing her grandmother's jewellery to *Olympia as Lewis Carroll's Beatrice Hatch* is a more reciprocal look—as though the child were increasingly able to look back at us with the same look as ours upon her—what the later works go on to show is through this reciprocity the artist's children becoming more active and autonomous. It is here that we might say the quotational or even allegorical aspects of Papapetrou's images take effect (and there is something important in the fact that these later images are allegorical rather than the biographies or even autobiographies of the earlier work—there is a distancing even in their formal means). We are thinking here, for example, of Papapetrou's 2006 series *Haunted Country*, which features a series of lost children, inspired both by paintings like Frederick McCubbin's *Lost Child* (1886) and literary and newspaper accounts of lost and endangered children. Of course, what is being spoken of here is the loss of her children to the photographer herself, as they grow older. And notably the subjects of these photographs do not look at the lens of the camera. The previous connection between the photographer and her subject, even if indirect, is foregone. Instead, Papapetrou shows us groups of independent, increasingly self-organising children socialising and communicating amongst themselves. There is not here the despair and desolation of Henson—the children are self-directed, volitional. If lost, they do not remain the subject a distant gaze they cannot escape, but increasingly wander off into their own space where they can no longer be seen.¹² This is the true loss the images point to, which would be the notional end of Papapetrou's project, all the more powerful for following the growing subjectivity and personhood of her children (there is indeed a narrative to her oeuvre, as opposed to the static reiteration of Henson).

There is something undeniably kitsch about Papapetrou's work, and the response to her intervention and the renewed scrutiny of her photographs was by and large unfavourable. And in truth, works featuring the mother-daughter relationship can only appear anachronistic in a culture in which there is no place for a mother's love, in which everything is reduced to the physical or biological, and in which the materialism of Henson's work seems the very definition of 'art' itself. There appears no way of representing the love of a mother for her child—the underlying subject of Papapetrou's work shorn of its citationality and perhaps what this seeks to avoid—without appearing sentimental. (It would be very interesting to compare Papapetrou's work in this regard with that of Del Kathryn Barton.¹³) This is the argument of the feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray, that what constitutes our society is the exclusion or repression of the mother-child relationship. As she writes:

*Patriarchy has disrupted the mother-daughter relationship through an act of matricide. As patriarchy reduced women to their relationship to motherhood, the woman-mother and woman-lover is erased in favour of the mother-reproducer... In a sense we need to establish a women-to-woman relationship of reciprocity with our mother, in which they might possibly also feel themselves to be our daughters.*¹⁴

For Irigaray, it is this mother-daughter relationship that might open up, or require, a new possibility of the spiritual or divine: "Does respect for God made flesh not imply that we should incarnate God within us and in our sex: daughter-woman-mother."¹⁵

It is at this point that we see the true art historical source for Papapetrou's art—the Madonna and Child. It is a feminised Madonna and Child, one that sees the mother-child relationship as the true sign of divinity in this world, as well as opening up a rethinking of the traditional notion of divinity with its father-son emphasis. Papapetrou, along the lines of what Irigaray suggests throughout her work, seeks to find a new way of thinking the mother-child relationship in terms that do not see it as subservient to the masculine. It is not perhaps any direct idea of God that is at stake here, but rather the idea of a certain "goal" that "gives us the authority to grow" in holding out the "possibility of a present and future".¹⁶ It was indeed, the question of how the depiction of children in art could be pornographic if we think of the Madonna and Child that many commentators, writers of letter to papers and those who left messages on blogs spontaneously brought up during the controversy over Papapetrou's work. It is an intuitively correct insight because it is pornography (the *de facto* state of all images today) that is the very symptom of our current regime of bio-power. When the body is depoliticised, reduced to the physical, it is unable to offer any resistance

Opposite: composite screen-grabs of several print media website representations of Bill Henson's seized photographs. The image at bottom left is the one used on the front of the invitation, without the black bar, of course!

to the gaze, has no sense of interiority, can keep no secrets. It is this understanding of the body that both Henson and the child protection advocates share: the body endlessly endangered, scattered to the four winds, either by the internet or by that "chemical and mineral roiling" spoken of by Schjeldahl, and unable to constitute any kind of a political project with a future dimension. Papapetrou's work by contrast, concerns the paradox of a mother teaching her child to be free, giving to it the impossible gift of will, autonomy, the ability freely to consent. This is of course, the fundamental religious paradox, commented upon endlessly for example in all Christian theologies.

It is tempting to oppose a certain feminine to a masculine here, but in truth not even the opposition between the religious and the irreligious is adequate to the distinction I seek to draw. I am certainly not making an argument for the return of religion or even a more generalised spirituality in art here. In the end, Irigaray's recent turn to Eastern religion, yoga and tantrism is a little too New Age for me. But I think that Papapetrou's art is the true antidote to both Henson and the childhood protection lobby, which are both an outcome of the reduction of politics to bio-politics. It is a state in which the child becomes the emblem of all of us, the contemporary version of the *homo sacer*. It is to begin to think that any proposed law to control the depiction of children in art would be itself the problem, would bring about the thing it fears, in exactly what Agamben analyses as that "state of exception" that allows the general rule. As soon as we understand the body as subject to law, we are already in an irreversible relationship to pornography and total exposure—all images, all bodies, all looking at images, are by definition guilty. So that, in the final instance of the letter returning, it is just those who accuse the work of Henson and Papapetrou of being "revolting" who are already in the realm of pedophilia, "beautiful souls" who while apparently standing outside, are in fact bringing about the very situation they lament.

This essay was originally presented at a panel entitled 'How Good is Contemporary Art? Ethics and Aesthetics in Art', Hyde Park Hotel, Perth, for the *Bureau of Ideas*, Perth, 4 August 2008.

Notes

¹ Jacques Lacan, 'Seminar on "The Purlined Letter"', *Écrits*, New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2006: 30 (translation amended)

² David Malouf, *Bill Henson, Mnemosyne*, Art Gallery of New South Wales, 2005: 35

³ Ibid: 12

⁴ Ibid: 283

⁵ Ibid: 8

⁶ Roger Benjamin, 'The Henson Defence', *The Australian*, 31 May 2008: 25

⁷ Mnemosyne: 442

⁸ Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Stanford University Press, 1998: 114-15

⁹ Agamben speaks of those images of the "imploring eyes" of Rwandan children used by aid agencies to raise money as the definitive sign of our contemporary "bare life" (*Homo Sacer*: 133), and of the way this humanitarianism is perfectly in sympathy with a State power that will ensure nothing will change—and is this not the case with the "sympathy" that Henson's distressed figures are meant to evoke in their viewer, the sense that we share a common humanity across even our essential aloneness? Is not the "humanism" of Henson's images so beloved by his (largely conservative) admirers precisely an effect of their fundamental depoliticisation?

¹⁰ Maurice O'Riordan, 'To Dream a Child', *Art Monthly Australia*, July 2008: 3

¹¹ See http://www.austliacouncil.gov.au/news/news_items/draft_children_in_art_protocols_released

¹² Continuing this theme of the photographer's subjects constituting their own space, there is a still later series by Papapetrou, *Games of Consequence* (2008), in which children are shown whispering to and playing games with each other

¹³ Tonya Turner, 'GOMA wants to buy Kathryn Barton's sexually explicit pictures', *The Courier Mail*, 14 November, 2008 see <http://www.news.com.au/couriermail/story/0,27574,24653517-3102,00.html>

¹⁴ Cited in Hilary Robinson, *Reading Art, Reading Irigaray: The Politics of Art by Women*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2006: 177, 178

¹⁵ Luce Irigaray, 'Divine Women', *Sexes and Genealogies*, Columbia University Press, 1993: 71

¹⁶ Ibid: 72