

## **Curating Photography in Australia**

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This paper derives from some early research into the various forces currently influencing photography curating in Australian art galleries. We are especially interested in new technologies such as the internet, but more generally the protean nature of the medium itself. Naturally, to better understand the present, we start with a few glimpses of the past.

### **The Pre-History**

Although the institutional collecting and curating of photography didn't begin in earnest until the 1970s, in the five or so decades before then the powerful *idea* of collecting photographs was intermittently discussed, at various levels of institutional authority, with various degrees of vigour.

At the end of the First World War, the amateur photographic magazine the *Australasian Photo Review* called for a 'national collection of Australian photographic records'. The Mitchell Library was one of several who responded positively to this idea, even suggesting a list of twelve different categories of photographs which amateurs could take for a future repository. However the librarians didn't follow through on their initial positive noises and collections failed to materialise.

Thirty years later, at the end of the Second World War, the idea of a national collection was raised again. *Contemporary Photography* devoted an entire issue to the new sharp bromide enlargements Harold Cazneaux had made of his Pictorialist negatives of Old Sydney, and declared that they 'would be a valuable acquisition for the Mitchell Library or Australian Historical Societies.' However, once more the library failed to follow through, and Cazneaux's photographs remained uncollected.

However, the interest in photography as an Australian tradition and the persuasiveness of the idea of significant public collections of historic

photographs, continued to build. (APR covers) By the 1960s both libraries and state galleries were beginning to make serious policy commitments to collecting photographs. The aims were to both collect photographs as documents of Australian life, and to record the importance of photography as a visual medium.<sup>i</sup>

### **The State Art Galleries**

The NGV story is exemplary here. Under Director Eric Westbrook, despite forthright opposition from some members (one referred to it as “cheat’s way of doing a painting”, the Trustees approve the establishment of Department of Photography in 1967.<sup>ii</sup> The first work to enter the collection – David Moore's documentary photograph Surry Hills Street (1948) – was acquired through a grant from Kodak.<sup>iii</sup> In the same year the NGV imported The Photographer’s Eye, a touring exhibition from New York’s Museum of Modern Art, which had been the first art museum to establish a Department of Photography in 1940.<sup>iv</sup> The exhibition was curated by MoMA’s John Szarkowski, the most influential photography curator of the second half of the twentieth century, as a statement of his formalist position on photographic aesthetics, a didactic concern “with photographic style and with photographic tradition”<sup>v</sup>. Its title was pastiched in a local version, The Perceptive Eye (1969–1970).

By 1973 the yet to be opened National Gallery of Australia had purchased its first photograph, an artistic confection by Mark Strizic that looked more like a print than a photograph. Two years later the AGNSW was laying the foundation for its collection with the acquisition, exhibition and book on the early twentieth century photographs of Harold Cazneaux, collected by them as fine-art Pictorialist prints, rather than as the sharp bromide enlargements that had been published by *Contemporary Photography* in 1948.

In this period the dual nature of the photograph as both a carrier of historical and social information, and an aesthetic art object and exemplar of a tradition, which had co-existed within the formulations of the previous decades, was finally separated between libraries and galleries. Library

collecting focused on the photograph as a document of Australian life. For example in 1971 the National Library of Australia clarified its collection policy: it would only collect photographs as examples of photographic art and technique from the period up to 1960, leaving post-1960s 'art for art's sake' photography to the new state and federal gallery photography departments.<sup>vi</sup>

The stage was set for the much-vaunted 'Photo Boom' of the 1970s, when, as Helen Ennis has pointed out, the baby boomer generation turned to photography for its contemporaneity in the context of a counter-cultural energy.<sup>vii</sup> Galleries and libraries found themselves embedded in the newly constructed infrastructure of the Whitlam era: the newly established Australia Council, rapidly expanding tertiary courses in photography, short lived magazines and commercial galleries, and the establishment of the Australian Centre for Photography in 1974.

In this context the need to define photography as both a tradition and a new language became more urgent. And, as had been the case in the previous decades, overseas models were crucial.<sup>viii</sup> Thus Athol Shmith, a key member of the NGV Advisory Committee set up in the late 1960s, corresponded and travelled regularly to Europe. David Moore, one of the key figures in the establishment of the Australian Centre for Photography in Sydney, was familiar with plans for the International Centre for Photography in New York. And the first director of the ACP, Graham Howe, was brought back from a stint at the London Photographers' Gallery.<sup>ix</sup> In addition, the longed-for acknowledgement from overseas materialised in the form of John Szarkowski himself, who was invited on a 'papal' tour by the ACP in 1974. Szarkowski gave six public lectures titled "Towards a Photographic Tradition"<sup>x</sup>. The purpose of the national tour "was to liberate photography from the world of technique and commerce and to suggest that it could also be of absorbing artistic and intellectual interest."<sup>xi</sup>

Although Szarkowski's approach was put under sustained stress during the period of postmodernism – especially by feminist critics – his 'formalist' approach to the medium continued to dominate way that photography was

understood in the art museum for the ensuing decades. Even as the discourse emerged of an Australian tradition with, for instance, the NGV's investment in Australian documentary photographers in the late sixties, this was embedded in a model of Euro-American modernism.<sup>xii</sup> As Ennis puts it, "The argument for 'photography as art' was based on the critical position of Modernism. Photography was considered to be a medium with its own intrinsic characteristics".<sup>xiii</sup> At the Art Gallery of NSW Gael Newton deployed a clear art historical teleology, with the acquisition of Pictorialist photography by Harold Cazneaux and other members of the Sydney Camera Circle forming the foundation for the collection. Pictorialism was important to Newton because it was a: 'conscious movement, aimed at using the camera more creatively'<sup>xiv</sup> Her exhibitions of Harold Cazneaux and Australian Pictorial Photography in 1975 closely followed by a monograph on Max Dupain in 1980, seen as the modernist successor to the Pictorialists. However, the galleries also engaged with the contemporary art photography of the graduates from the new art schools, as well as emerging postmodern ideas. For instance the title of the Art Gallery of New South Wales' 1981 exhibition Reconstructed Vision defined this new style of work against, but within the trajectory of, the newly established historical traditions.

In Melbourne a slightly different but equivalent art historical strategy was taking place within the institution of the NGV. This included the mass importation of canonical images from overseas. For instance, shortly after her appointment, the NGV's inaugural curator (and first ever curator of photography in Australia), Jennie Boddington, ordered Farm Security Administration re-prints from the Library of Congress's reproduction service.<sup>xv</sup> However at the same time the NGV also exhibited Carol Jerrems in 1973 and Bill Henson in 1975.<sup>xvi</sup>

## **The Libraries**

While galleries were using art historical strategies to embed photography within their structures, libraries were also confirming their commitment to photography, but as a non aesthetic-object based, content-driven, curatorial

strategy. While the subjectivist photo boom of the seventies, combined with Modernist and Postmodernist teleologies, drove the aesthetic strategies of galleries, the nationalistic socially cohesive agendas of things like the 1988 Bicentenary drove the content-based strategies of library photo collecting.

In a forerunner to today's participatory online photographic projects, in 1983 Euan McGillivray and Matthew Nickson proposed a snapshot collecting project, 'Australia as Australians saw it', which would copy photographs in the possession of individuals, then index them and make them accessible through the latest technology. During the Bicentenary year Alan Davies, curator at the State Library of New South Wales, travelled to twenty-three country towns and copied about seven thousand vernacular photographs from 576 individuals under the title 'At Work and Play', made accessible by a videodisc keyword search.

### **The Present Moment**

Fast forward to the present. Over the intervening 40 years, since the establishment of various departments and the ACP, the boundaries of photography have expanded. However galleries have largely kept to the historical trajectories inaugurated in the 1970s. In the 1980s, photographic reproductive processes became central to postmodern art, which had the flow on effect of boosting photography's place in the art museum (Tracey Moffatt, Bill Henson, Anne Zahalka, etc). But like the photoconceptualism before it about which we now hear so much,<sup>xvii</sup> postmodernism did not fundamentally alter photography departments' focus on 'art photography'. Indeed, as many writers have observed, the wholesale acceptance of photography *as art* by the institutions and market occurred precisely at the moment of the critique of *art photography* by artists and postmodern critics.<sup>xviii</sup> Yet photography's *potential* as a protean medium to disturb or at least promote a dialogue between institutional disciplines and ordering systems has rarely been explored by curators. There are isolated exceptions, such as the disruptive placement of contemporary Indigenous work, like Brook Andrew's *Sexy and Dangerous* (1996) – which appropriates an image by Charles Kerry, from the

Mitchell *library* collection – within galleries of nineteenth-century colonial painting at the NGV.<sup>xxix</sup> But into the 1990s and 2000s, photography departments essentially continued a monographic and consolidation phase<sup>xx</sup>, aided by the international prominence of large-scale colour photography as art (what Julian Stallabrass dubs “museum photography”<sup>xxi</sup>, such as the Düsseldorf School). Meanwhile, we have seen the ongoing integration of photography as part of interdisciplinary art practice (sometimes dubbed the ‘post-medium condition’). Simultaneously, we have witnessed the rise of digital photography – whose effects are much more widely felt outside the museum. Indeed, unlike the libraries, constantly striving to digitise their image collections and make them available online, art museums, if anything, have embraced photography’s status as an object to be experienced in the flesh.

If the primary aim of photography curating in the 1970s was to establish photography as art<sup>xxii</sup>, this has clearly been achieved. Photography is ubiquitous within contemporary art, but *not* as an autonomous tradition – rather as a mode integrated within wider practices. And if the now forty-year old institutional structures are still largely with us, if museums continue to have Departments, curators and galleries of photography, this is largely for the history of photography, for the knowledge of specific collections and conservation techniques. Here it should be noted that in 2013, the dedicated photography gallery at the NGV International was given up *without any controversy* (along with prints and drawings). In the early 1970s, photography enthusiasts had fought for a dedicated area, even just a corridor outside the Department of Prints and Drawings in 1972.<sup>xxiii</sup> Currently, in a delicious irony, the old photography space is being occupied by Patrick Pound’s installation *The Gallery of Air* (2013) – a poetic “site specific installation comprising 91 works from the collection of the NGV and 286 works from the collection of the artist” organized around the idea of air.<sup>xxiv</sup> Although it includes a wide variety of media in its playful exploration of collecting (both personal and institutional), Pound’s work is underpinned by photography’s role as an ordering system. Indeed, various inclusions (such as *Man With a Tie*) were previously included in a previous work of found

photographs, *Portrait of the Wind* (2010). Incidentally, Pound has worked *around* photography for well over a decade, often using found photographs, but his work has never been acquired by a photography department, undoubtedly because he is not a photographer in the strict sense of the term.

Clearly, museum departments can no longer work in isolation. However, what the mere integration of photography into the newly contemporary art museum too easily elides<sup>xxv</sup> is that photography's place in the art museum has always been unstable, its ambiguous status as object and information continually threatening the grounds of the art museum's hierarchies and collection policies. This instability manifests itself in different ways in different periods. But as we have already hinted at, one of the underlying themes in photography in the museum is the constant exclusion of the vernacular and of reproducibility itself. As Douglas Crimp argued in the late 1970s, "The inclusion of photography.... Within the canon of modernist art practices has, by its own logic, to exclude *photography as reproduction*."<sup>xxvi</sup> We have seen this in Australia in relation to the location of photography between the library and the art museum, in terms of a split between information and aesthetics, a documentary database versus an aesthetic object. Photography's broader insertion into digital networks reveals these tensions yet again, in a new guise. Within a modernist logic, the networked digital image, circulating as reproducible information, is guaranteed to be excluded. One of the aims of our project is to investigate this exclusion, to uncover the potential for different kinds of photography in the art museum.<sup>xxvii</sup>

### **Photography and the Discourse of Curating Contemporary Art**

We are only at the start of our research – funded in the first instance by an Australian Council grant that will allow us to interview curators around the country next year – and we could end here. But in this particular context we want to finish by considering how photography relates to curating art more broadly. We only have time for a couple of tentative observations with a view for further discussion.

It could be argued that similar issues are faced by other Departments such as Painting, in the ‘post-medium’ age. And indeed that the sway of the MoMA Photography Department has been no different than the influence of the massively influential travelling show *Two Decade of American Painting* in 1967. We argue that the protean and unstable nature of the medium of photography makes its placement more problematic. As a result, within the rapidly growing discourse of curating contemporary art, we argue that more attention needs to be paid to the specific situation of photography and the history of photography exhibitions.<sup>xxviii</sup> This is not to regress into medium specificity – rather it is to acknowledge that photography – unlike say paint on canvas – is multiple and its democratic culture complicates its place in the art gallery. It has a more or less integrated tradition, which we can and should continue to value, while simultaneously recognizing that this tradition is based on a series of exclusions (as Peter Galassi once put it, the tradition is both indispensable and inadequate).

In identifying the potential of photography in the art gallery, we also want to argue that photography curators can learn from artists working with the (always incomplete) archive (including various ‘metaphotographers’ such as Patrick Pound and Erik Kessels<sup>xxix</sup>). Furthermore, if curators are engaged in creating contexts, networked photography opens up new possibilities for this to happen.<sup>xxx</sup> While we are certainly not arguing that the art gallery ought to emulate the experience of the Internet, we are proposing that the days of authoritarian presentations of a connoisseurial canon may be over while photography’s potential to activate spectators may have only just begun.<sup>xxxi</sup>



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<sup>i</sup> The National Librarian of Australia, Harold White, began to work with Keast Burke who in 1956 proposed a two tier national collection: one part to be purely about the information which photographs contained, and assembled by microfilming records and copying images in the library's own darkrooms; the other part to be about the medium itself, made up of 'artistic salon photographs' and historic cameras.

This uneasy co-habitation of 'information' and 'aesthetics' persisted for several years. For instance in 1967 the photographer Albert Brown formed an alliance with the director of the National Gallery of Victoria, Eric Westerbrook, to develop three main aims for a department of photography. The second of the three aims was to: 'create an awareness of contemporary life by collecting and producing (our emphasis) documentary photographs.'

<sup>ii</sup> Crombie, 2nd Sight

<sup>iii</sup> Isobel Crombie, 'Messages within a developing medium', *The Australian*, 13 October 2009. In Anne Latreille's 1973 *Age* article she notes that half the NGV's collecting money came from Kodak.

<sup>iv</sup> While the V&A in London has collected photography since the mid-C19th, the Museum of Modern Art was the first museum to include photography as a form of artistic expression on an equal footing with the other arts. Founded in 1929, MoMA presented its first photography exhibition in 1937 (the major Beaumont Newhall exhibition on the history of photography in 1938–1937). MoMA held their first one-person exhibition, by Walker Evans, in 1938, and established their Department of Photography in 1940, then the only one in any art museum. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, not without a fight, accepted photography as art into their collection in 1928 – with a gift from Stieglitz to William Ivins, Curator of Prints (see Malcolm Daniel) – and held a major exhibition in 1939 to mark the hundredth year of photography's invention – although the Department's name was not changed to Prints and Photographs until the 1970s, and an independent department not established until 1992.

<sup>v</sup> Szarkowski, *Photographer's Eye* catalogue

<sup>vi</sup> Helen Ennis article. Note also that Anne Latreille in *The Age* 1973 claims that "In Canberra, the NLA is acquiring photographs taken before 1960, while the National Gallery is concentrating on post 1960 work" However despite this neat separation, the discussion as to what constituted photography as an integral medium, an ongoing tradition, and a visual language, continued to be everybody's responsibility.

<sup>vii</sup> The stage was set for what Helen Ennis described in the final chapter of Gael Newton's *Shades of Light* (1988), as "an unprecedented level of activity involving photography." (134). Ennis refers to the baby-boomer generation who turned to photography for its "contemporaneity" in the context of countercultural energy,

<sup>viii</sup> The early 1970s saw an Australian campaign for 'photography as art' (137), with older photographers joining younger figures in lobbying for infrastructure or simply setting up galleries themselves. This expansion included some short lived private galleries as well as the ACP, which officially opening its doors in 1974. As in the initial correspondence by Keast Bourke and Albert Brown with Librarians in the previous decades, such initiatives were largely driven by photographers themselves, whose leading figures were closely aware of what was happening internationally.

<sup>ix</sup> All of these developments were framed around another broadly didactic mission; that photography is central to visual culture but "the public needs educating" in the art of photographic seeing.<sup>ix</sup> Meanwhile, the initial aims of the art institutions (as expressed in policy documents) were broader than fine art (often making reference to broader fields of photography such as scientific and fashion in founding documents: an NGV pamphlet from

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1970s states that “The Gallery’s responsibility in this area is to define function, style and character, so helping to clarify that which is photographic, that which is becoming the photographic tradition”). The twin curatorial project of the 1970s was to establish photography as a *fine art*, and establish a *tradition*. However, in practice what occurred was the embrace of a selective tradition of photography as part of an international art market

<sup>x</sup> Recently recounted in *Photofile* Photofile Vol 93, 2013

<sup>xi</sup> Howe, A&A, 1974

<sup>xii</sup> Athol Shmith’s connections to Europe facilitated curators from London’s Royal Photographic Society and the Bibliotheque Nationale in Paris agreeing to act as honorary advisors to the NGV Department.

<sup>xiii</sup> Ennis, 136

<sup>xiv</sup> *Silver and Grey: Fifty Years of Australian Photography 1900-1950*, Angus and Robertson, 1980, np

<sup>xv</sup> Martyn’s memory... [we should substantiate this – is it mentioned in the 1983 *Photofile* interview?]

<sup>xvi</sup> In Canberra the National Gallery not only purchased photographs from young art school trained Australian photographers through the largesse of the Phillip Morris Arts Grant, but also, in 1980, before it even opened, gained Ministerial approval to spend \$150,000 for the Ansel Adams Museum Set from an American gallery. [which one?]

<sup>xvii</sup> In Australia limited to isolated figures like Robert Rooney, Ian Burn and Dale Hickey...

<sup>xviii</sup> By the 1990s, this narrative of photoconceptualism was becoming clear (eg. see Jeff Wall or Charles Green): in that trajectory, artists in the late 1960s and early 1970s placed photography on an equal basis with avant-garde art. The transformation of photographs into ‘contemporary art in their own right’ was thus complete, assured by photography’s accession to a definitive and stable place in the mainstream of contemporary art. See also Abigail S-G.

<sup>xix</sup> See Thomas Weski, ‘Beyond the Pleasures of a Flawless Narrative: Photography in the Museum’ in *Cultures of the Curatorial* (Sternberg 2012)  
Martyn says “Iso’s Starn twin infatuation?” – but I don’t really understand this point. I see the Starn twins as an example of bad (postmodern) art photography.

<sup>xx</sup> Instead galleries have concentrated on monograph shows establishing an Australian canon (Shmith, Moore et al); or introducing an overseas canon to Australian audiences; Mapplethorpe; Magnum; survey shows. The curators would probably say they had enough on their hands doing all of this important work, because photography still relatively new in gallery terms, so still in consolidation and education phases

<sup>xxi</sup> Julian Stallabrass, ‘Museum Photography and Museum Prose’, *New Left Review*, no. 65, September-October 2010, pp. 93-125)

<sup>xxii</sup> A secondary aim, to establish an ‘Australian’ tradition, is equally shortcircuited. The ‘Australian tradition’, always already intertwined with international developments, has had to deal with the massive globalisation of imagery since the age of cheap air travel and the internet. Today it is often not even possible to identify who is, and who is not, an Australian photographer. (see Palmer and Howe) Even if the nature of the medium often makes place a core issue, and, as Ennis notes, the space ‘where the local and the global interact’ is where ambitious Australian photographers often purposely situate themselves.

<sup>xxiii</sup> Crombie, p.10

<sup>xxiv</sup> Text from the wall label

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<sup>xxv</sup> This is the stated strategy of Tate Modern Curator of Photography, Simon Baker, for instance. There are a few exceptions – exhibitions at MACBA curated by Jorge Ribalta, activities at Fotomuseum Winterthur, Amsterdam's Foam Gallery and the Wall at London Photography Gallery, for instance...

<sup>xxvi</sup> (Dewdney 108). **NB this is actually a paraphrase, not a quote from Crimp**

<sup>xxvii</sup> By tracing the history of curating photography, we can begin to understand the aspirations for the place of photography in the museum – commissions, collecting beyond art...

<sup>xxviii</sup> What can be learnt, for example, from the trajectory of utopian architectural-photographic spaces outlined by Jorge Ribalta, such as those designed by Lissitzky (Pressa, Film und Foto, etc), or The Family of Man.

<sup>xxix</sup> Fred Ritchin speaks of the need for 'metaphotographers' "who are capable of sorting through some of the billions of images now available, adding their own and contextualising all of them so they become more useful, more complex and more visible?"

<sup>xxx</sup> Media art curator Christiane Paul speaks of the curator as a 'filter feeder'

<sup>xxxi</sup> See Thomas Weski