Abstract:

This paper addresses the role of photography as a documentary medium and how this forms a basis for my practice-led studio investigations. In it, I will explore how photography is used to create histories and sustain specific notions of ‘legacy’ within the context of the family photo album.

Family history is often based on stories to which the photo album provides a visual point of reference. Despite the ostensible ‘objectivity’ of the family photograph though it is nonetheless as subjective as the stories that surround it. In this way, the photo album perpetuates a hegemony of truth that obscures the fragmentary and highly selective nature of these documents and stories.

The result is that every photo album implicitly documents the gaps or voids present in understandings of our own histories. Homi Bhabha refers to these kinds of voids as ‘disjunctive historical spaces’ – spaces of slippage that create the opportunity for new narratives and understandings to occur.

Using Bhabha’s ideas as a chief point of reference, I will explore how these voids or gaps in information – and the opportunities for re-examination that they open up - can be explored through contemporary photomedia. Digital technologies such as camera phones and scanners generate a space in which photography’s own documentary conventions can be turned in on themselves to create a subterfuge. My current studio-based research involves using the scanner to navigate through my family’s sometimes-‘occulted’ history, in order to explore, document and recover my connection to this narrative. I am primarily interested in the scanner as a tool for capturing not simply surfaces, but objects, moments or movements in time. Objects or moments captured by the scanner can often be simultaneously distorted and consolidated, blurred and sharpened. This paper will propose that this ‘slippage’,
literally expressed in the disruption of the pixelated field, can be used to create a space in which alternative readings or understandings of past events can be explored and new narratives produced.

The basic concept of legacy in this paper refers to the cultural understandings and beliefs that have been passed down from previous generations. It refers to the qualities and attributes that are physical and tangible as well as those which are highly personal or intangible. The impact and implications of Australian Indigenous and immigrant culture can be conceived of as a legacy within art making practices. My research aims to define the term legacy by extending my personal understanding of my cultural history and how it informs my practice.

In my own case, legacy also represents interrupted and Eurocentric influences on Australian Indigenous history. Eurocentric influences encompass a personal European migrant history, as well as the general influence of colonial culture on Australian art practices. Interruption encompasses both what I know and do not know of my cultural history, as the knowledge of my Indigenous heritage has only recently come to light.

At the very outset of this project my commitment to understanding my cultural heritage was tested both through the ethical review process and the ticking of a box acknowledging my recently discovered cultural legacy.

I found myself questioning what it meant to tick the box ‘are you of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander decent?’.

“If I tick yes - what does that mean? What does it change? Will I be viewed as taking the opportunities of a ‘real’ Aboriginal person? Would other Aboriginal people be proud of me for owning my Indigienity and for having the courage to acknowledge my cultural heritage? Would I be seen to be laying claim to something that I should not,
to something that I did not grow up with and thus maybe have no right to?”.  
(C.Gibson, personal communication, November 13, 2013)

It took me two weeks to finally tick the ‘yes’ box.

The ethical review process took four months of back and forth discussions and re-writes with my supervisors and the ethics department. In order to find out more about my family history I wanted to conduct interviews with family members to gain a better understanding of cultural legacy. The interviews were considered a low-risk ethics application, however, because of the Indigenous content involved, the project paper work went to a full sitting of the ethics panel. The process was also difficult as I was exploring and searching for my connection to my Aboriginality, the impact of which to me was unknown to my research, making it difficult to outline the exact ethical considerations that may or may not unfold.

As stated by Marx “Men [and women] make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past.” (Marx cited in Dirlik, 1996,p.1)

There are two main features that run through the theoretical and practical components of my research project. One is the tangible or object connection to legacy through things such as photographs, family photo albums and collected objects, which connect to the Eurocentric idea of linear narrative. The second feature is the use of technology and technological language. The operation of these two features creates a space or gap in which a linear story can be interrupted and the non-linear temporality encompassed by an Indigenous ideology can be explored and heard. As Dirlik states (1996, p.24) “Indigenous ideology suggests that the past is never really past, but offers ‘stories’ that may be required to resolve problems of the present, even as they are changed to answer present needs.” These features do not always sit neatly side by side: they are in constant dialogue with each other, much like my own mixed cultural heritage.

My material research is primarily concerned with collecting objects, photographs, documents and stories from family members. As stated by Fred Myers (2002, p.14), “Objects are an important medium of social activity precisely because they have properties – because they are vulnerable, fragile, and losable, because they rot or
endure.” Properties encompassed by the object allow them to be an effective point of departure for an exploration into personal cultural legacy, as legacy itself can be described as fragile, losable, and so forth. Objects like photographs are vessels for memory and bear a connection to a fixed place in time and history.

Family history is often based on stories to which the photo album provides a visual point of reference or ‘photographic trace’ (Harrison, 2009, p.103). Sontag (1973, p.8) posits that the family photo album is a ‘curated chronicle’ or a ‘portable kit’ that bears witness and connection to times past.

Despite the ostensible ‘objectivity’ of the family photograph, it is nonetheless as subjective as the stories that surround it. By bearing witness, the family photo album perpetuates hegemony of truth that obscures the fragmentary and highly selective nature of these documents and stories. Importantly every photo album also implicitly documents the gaps or voids pent in understandings of our own histories. Bhabha (1997, p.125 1994, p.122) refers to voids as ‘disjunctive historical spaces’ – spaces of ‘slippage’ that create the opportunity for new narratives and understandings to occur.

Slippage can be conceived of not only as a conceptual construct, but also as an application or entity. The physicality of slippage is denoted as a literal distortion, inserted by digital technologies, in the pixelated field. ‘Responsive digital tools’ allow for the rendering of slippage, challenging our temporal relationship to a fixed-point perspective or linear narrative. (Weinbren cited in Lovejoy, 2004, p. 192)

The application of slippage allows a physical and metaphorical space in which the artists’ interpretation or narrative can be considered or heard. Mules (2000, p.311) posits that there is no single plane of reality, rather, that there are countless possible realities that lead into and out of the ‘actual’ creating pathways into the future and past.

Digital information or the digital photograph can be viewed as a ‘raw material’ for an endless series of digressions (Burnett, 2005, p.28). Digital photographs and files have become an assertion of movement, transformation and in-betweenness, gaining status as a ‘liminal object’, an object constantly in flux, open to new interpretations and iterations (Van Djick, 2008, p.67).
My exploration of the spatial field began through experimentations in relation to the application of slippage. The tension between clarity and distortion that is created by the scanner and ‘glitchy’ Apps is a punctum for my works. The physical and tangible distortion enabled by the scanner and glitch Apps links metaphorically to the way in which the stories that are held by these objects and documents are recounted or retold – various versions with their own distorted truths.

The responsive nature of the hand-held scanner allows for a tactile and performative interaction with the object, allowing me to paint or map my version of the object and its relationship to time and space.

The scanners appeal lays in its ability to not only capture tangible surfaces and objects, but also its ability to capture specific moments in time. In response to my actions, objects or moments captured by the scanner can often be simultaneously distorted and consolidated, blurred and sharpened. The performing of these manual manipulations occurs through deliberate gestures and interactions with the objects being documented. The scanner captures a dialogue and tension between the temporal and the ephemeral in one image.

Building on the concept of capturing these tensions or slippages, I began experimenting with the App Photosynth. Photosynth is a panoramic App that often glitches resulting in distortion and pixilation. The App ‘doubles’ sections of the photograph or omits whole parts of the image replacing them with black voids. The App, unlike the scanner, is able to capture whole spaces and multiple objects in relationship to one another. I began documenting the interior spaces of family members homes with the App. Photosynth rendered these interior spaces both recognisable and foreign at once. The capturing of tensions between the known and unknown, the tangible and intangible, and the temporal and ephemeral metaphorically mirrored my own explorations into the process of legacy.

Like the scanner, the App does not capture all of the information present. The program and the artist hold the power in determining what will be documented and what will be omitted. It is within these voids that the audience is afforded a break from the image to consider what is missing or not being told.
The dialogue between the archival and tangible object and responsive digital technology has resulted in a slippage that has enabled me to approach this hybrid cultural legacy through both linear and non-linear narrative lenses; encompassed by Eurocentric and Indigenous ideology. Artwork that encompasses the ‘borderline work of culture’ does not simply evoke or retell the past but renews the past (Bhabha, 1994 p.10). In my work, the use of responsive digital tools has allowed me to interrupt the performance of the present by reconfiguring the past as an ‘in-between’ space. (Bhabha, 1994 p.10).
References


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