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## **SEEING DOUBLE TIME**

Photographs are essentially fragments of time and space. From the moment the picture is snapped from reality the time and the space of the subject are forever entwined in a piece of film. The image can be printed and subsequently viewed by those to whom the communicate is passed.

A photograph is a document of the present but immediately on it's capture a new context is created for the subject ~ that being it [the pictured subject] becomes the past. The contents of photographs do not change and age. They stay fixed in the time of creation.

Part of the interest that society has for photography is the 'time capsule' nature of the process. The beholder of the photograph is transported to the original moment of the image's birth. There, some kind of meaning meets the intensity of the gaze. Usually looking at old photos of earlier times is amusing as the recorded fashions, situations and subjects seem so remote from the present. Depending on the connection the viewer has with the subject or time portrayed meaning can vary.

Photographs are not often connected with any other grander purpose except for representing a visual hiccup in the continuum of time. A single random image tells only one part of the story of time. Multiple images by the flux of constant change where references flow frame by frame tell so much more. A movie deals better with the passing of time than the single picture usually does.

While an individual image may be limited in it's ability to connect the viewer with the passage of time, two or more images separated by time intervals, can address other,

sometimes more abstract meanings. A photography exhibition called *Seeing Double* shown recently at the Toowoomba Regional Art Gallery facilitates new opportunities for reflection on concepts about time, photography, and the message created for society by the image. Essentially the show featured pairs of photographs of Toowoomba architecture made nearly 20 years apart. One set of images from 1980 are in black and white whilst the contemporary images are presented in colour. The recent image work is composed with a mirror-like precision enabling the two documents to be framed in dyptich form. This presentation creates a contest of interpretation for the viewer.

The process of re-photography is not new. Thirty years ago American photographer Mark Klett and others commemorated the original photographic surveys of the American West of the 1870s by re-photographing the same locations 100 years later. Their concept was to show change but in doing so found the work provided an extra curiosity for the viewer.

*With extreme precision we aligned our cameras so that each image in the ground glass matched a copy print as perfectly as possible. Like an antiphonal choir, where two groups sing in answer to one another, the photographs are read together, back and forth, as the viewer discovers similarities and differences, checking detail against detail. There is no simple way to size up the meaning of change. Any area of the photographs could be the spot where a viewer finds the significant clue. JoAnn Verburg <sup>1</sup>*

While the initial temptation is to compare like elements and see where paint peeled, identify refurbished structures and note tree growth it can become a game of *before*s and *after*s. The photographs also connect us with the passage of time. With the two references provided as stimulus the viewer can interpolate changes through time and draw other conclusions. In the mind the peeling paint can be repainted and the tree cut down and seedling replanted.

When John Elliott and I collaborated on the taking of the first images we were interested in the public and private buildings and structures of Toowoomba which exhibited interesting and unusual features. We were unaware of the concept of re-photography and were quite singular in our pursuit of making a series of large format [10"x8"] camera images and exhibiting the works. We were not, at the time, preparing a collection of images for exhuming and re-imaging 20 years later. Although curiously, in the 20 years since the original Toowoomba photography I have worked on many projects that have pursued the concept of re-photography. <sup>2</sup>

The re-photography has been completed by students of the Diploma of Photography program from the Southern Queensland Institute of TAFE. Theirs was no easy task. Subjects needed to be located, time of day for re-shooting established, suitable lenses selected and ameanable weather all had to be considered. In the end a body of work has been presented. The viewing of which will entice certain responses, usually, as proposed, a game of "Pick the difference". But more can be gleaned from these imaged pairs.

Sue Ford, an Australian artist photographer from the seventies created a body of re-photography work which dealt with the human face. Portrait pictures presented in twos and threes separated by 5 and 10 year intervals told the story of the human ageing process. She believed the face was a map 'Everybody's face tells you about the society they live in and what they are feeling'.<sup>3</sup> The building portraits in *Seeing Double* communicate in a similar way.

Society's changing needs and expectations for the built environment is reflected in these dual representations. A derelict building is refurbished. A home becomes a place of business. A gasometer storage structure is demolished. A civic fountain pool is filled in and converted to a garden. Available now for question and contemplation are the reasons for the changes. Cryptic clues found in the photographs followed up by some detective work identify that the civic fountain and pool were identified a drowning hazards and rather than fence the structure as required by new local government rules in 1992 it was filled in. Natural gas has replaced the need for the gasometer storage facility and an enlarged central business district overtakes residential areas dictating the change in usage.



Other society pressures relating to 'acceptable appearance' of things also facilitates change. The old Toowoomba Foundry wall was a facade in which it's industrial heritage was written and wrought. Although an eyesore in 1982 there is a tinge of loss felt for the new slick painted hoarding lacks any kind of character. The need to represent pride in business appearance caused the re-cladding. Children now are not contented to play in the Rotary Park's octopus tentacles hence a new experiential and educational facility is provided.

Society morphs it's surroundings to fit it's inward and exterior needs. Some changes are practical, others aesthetic, yet other changes are due to forces such as neglect and the combined effects of nature and time.

*Seeing Double* is an exhibition about the difference between then and now. Along the way other dialogue is established for the curious beholder of the work. The images

from these two time zones state inconspicuously that they are markers representing two times only. Already the sites photographed have changed further and this change will continue. Contemplation of this work encourages the recognition of change through time. Two time windows as presented enable the viewer to extrapolate other times : “what was this space like 200 years ago?” or “what will it be like in 50 years?”

Perhaps this notion should be put before planners and implementers of urban development. Responsibility for the visual world may rest with us all for the forces of rapid change are more society driven than merely the difference created by the normal processes of time and nature alone.

Ultimately this body of work demands further investigation in the form of the third stage of this journey of photographic representation - that is the re-re-photography of the pictured subjects 20 years hence.

Doug Spowart  
26 November 2000

1 *Between Exposures Second View ~ The Rephotographic Survey Project*, University of New Mexico Press, Albuquerque, 1984.

2 See “Tourist Facts acts Rituals and Relics - Araluen Art Gallery Alice Springs 1975; New Sights - Same Sites, Toowoomba Regional Art Gallery 1996 and The Logan 20 year Project - Logan Regional Art Gallery 1998.

3 *Shades of Light ~ Photography and Australia 1839~1988*, Gael Newton, Australian National Gallery, Collins Australia, 1988.