
Big Archives and Small Collections: Remarks on the Archival Mode in Contemporary Australian Art and Visual Culture

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In January 2014 the *Sydney Morning Herald* carried an item about the self-confessed cricket ‘tragic’ Rob Moody. For over thirty years Moody has recorded virtually every cricket match broadcast in Australia. He kept on recording because, he said: ‘I just didn’t wanna miss out on stuff’. His growing collection started out on VHS tape, migrated to DVD, and is now on a hard drive in a searchable database. As an ‘internet phenomena’, with his own YouTube channel, Moody now responds to his personal whims, or to the requests of other fans, to iterate various compilations from the archive. For instance he was able to expose the Australian batsman Shane Watson’s defective technique in a video that compiled every one of his LBW test dismissals.¹

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The fact that newspapers like the *Sydney Morning Herald* report on people like Moody indicates that this is the age of the archive. It is the age when newly discovered collections of idiosyncratic or vernacular oddities, such as Moody's, are brought to light virtually every week.² Paradoxically, to be contemporary now is to be archival. Archives are everywhere in our society. Media companies such as Fairfax, publishers of the *Sydney Morning Herald* who ran the Moody story, have now opened their picture archives to the public. Users can search their archives for watermarked images and, for a price, get a copy without the watermark.³ National institutions such as libraries and galleries are developing new data visualization and web 2.0 techniques to make their collections more publicly accessible and interactive.⁴ And at the private level we all seem to need increasingly complex computer programs like Lightroom or iPhoto just to keep track of the images our phones and cameras are constantly shedding, as well as online storage sites such as iCloud to contain and preserve them.⁵

And in contemporary art archival strategies are also ubiquitous. Rob Moody is a cricket tragic, not an artist, but his private archive, and his obsessive dedication to it, would be the envy of many contemporary artists working today. His mode of maintaining his archive as an object in its own right – vast and fluid, but ultimately unknowable in its entirety – and then enunciating statements from it that allow users access to its depths from various idiosyncratic perspectives, is exactly equivalent to the strategies of many contemporary artists, including myself.

Strategies of collecting, storing, cataloguing, organizing, searching, retrieving, and re-presenting – archival strategies – have been extensively discussed and documented within contemporary art over the past half a century.⁶ For instance the popular and ongoing Whitechapel series of readers 'Documents of Contemporary Art' highlights various themes in contemporary art by compiling extracts from touchstone philosophical and critical texts combined with statements from contemporary artists. Covering all of the obvious topics such as 'The Sublime' and 'Abstraction', the series is a good barometer for what is trending globally in contemporary art. One of the first books of the series was *The Archive*, edited by Charles Merewether. The back cover blurb states:

Among art's most significant developments worldwide since the 1960s has been a turn to the archive – the nexus of images, objects, documents and traces through which we recall and revisit individual and shared memories and

histories... the archive has become central in visual culture's investigations of history, memory, testimony and identity.⁷

Although Merewether is Australian, and was Artistic Director of the Biennale of Sydney in 2006 when the compilation he edited came out, there were no Australian artists or writers in *The Archive*. However, the plethora of books and articles on 'the archival' in contemporary art prompt the question: is there a particularly Australian, and more specifically Canberran, inflection to this global trend for archival art? How, specifically, do Australian artists relate to their history, both individual and national, as it may be either fragilely embodied in idiosyncratic personal collections, or else officially sanctioned by the totalising power of public archives? To address these questions I will concentrate on artists who primarily use photography to construct their archives, with a focus on archival art in relation to national archives, because as a Canberra based artist myself I have particularly worked in that area. As well, any discussion of the archive in contemporary Australian culture has to address the way Indigenous artists, who in many ways have the most at stake in the deployment of new archival strategies, have re-inhabited colonial and national archives.

MODES OF ARCHIVAL PHOTOGRAPHY IN AUSTRALIA

During the last thirty years, in keeping with global trends, more and more Australian artists have used archival strategies. They usually work in one of two modes: the first is to create a private 'archive' – either a modest collection of a single typology, or a larger more structurally complex archive with systems of cataloguing and retrieval built in; the second is to intervene in, inhabit, or visually interrogate, an existing archive.

When artists make their own archives they take the normal personal declarations of the artist and sublimate them within an archival structure. Instead of constructing a work or moulding a form, the artist simply nominates and then assembles a collection of found objects or images in a rudimentary or idiosyncratic taxonomic structure. An example of this mode is the work of the former Canberra artist David Wills. While living in Canberra, Wills constructed a small but very moving collection, called *B3*, that documented grandmotherly love and growing up in Australia.⁸ The work was a collection of thirty-three different hand-knitted 'Bananas in Pajamas', which were then individually photographed. This personal collection did not have the systematic complexity of an archive as such, with a built-in system for retrieving and comparing its components. Nonetheless, as each Banana



David Willis, Wunderwall, Australian National University, 2009

was meticulously photographed and placed side by side, each individual was enhanced by the rigorous context of the category in which it had been located by Willis.

Everybody in Australia knows the Bananas in Pajamas. For twenty years or so the popular television show crossed over from children's to adult culture. While a vast range of Banana merchandise, from plush toys to backpacks, was available for parents and grandparents to buy for their children, patterns from which you could knit your own Bananas were also regularly published in popular magazines such as the *Australian Women's Weekly*. Vernacular, home knitted Bananas regularly appeared in children's bedrooms, alongside the identical Banana clones which were produced in their thousands by factories in China.

Willis rescued his Bananas from the lonely isolation of op shops and garage sales, where their original recipients had abandoned them. These 'other' Bananas weren't stamped from the same factory template as the official plush toys, rather a different pair of loving hands had knitted each one from the same pattern. Each knitter had been more or less skillful in her stitching, each had chosen wool at a higher or lower level of virulence in the Bananas' signature colours of yellow, blue and white, and each had stuffed the Bananas with more or less wadding, distending the stitches to different degrees in different shapes. Most importantly, each had applied in her own unique way those vital details: the stitching

of the mouth, eyes and head-stalk – that last touch that finally animates the previously inert Banana with personality and life.

David Wills took from his archive each of these alternate Bananas – aberrant offshoots from an ideal root-stock – and made a series of respectful head and shoulder photographic portraits of them. The portraits were a reminiscent of oil paintings in an ancestral hall, executive portraits in a boardroom, or graduate portraits in a yearbook. But they also referenced the supremely serious deadpan style of Thomas Ruff and other member of the immensely influential ‘Dusseldorf School’ of photography, a generation of European photographers inspired by the work of Bernd and Hilla Becher who took the archive as their formal paradigm. The archive as a whole revealed something that each individual pose couldn’t. The careful repetition granted them each individually an uncanny vitality, independence and autonomy. Looking along the rows of knitted faces the viewer was able to compare the ways in which the identical DNA of the original Banana knitting pattern had been nurtured into unique personality. What allows these contrasts to take place is not only the warm love and care with which they were originally knitted, but Wills’ systematic collecting that allows us to compare them. Within the archival architecture these Bananas, who were mustered together from the far corners of Australian vernacular culture, were found to be just like each other but also utterly strange to each other.

In Canberra, Wills also produced another paradigmatic example of archival art. His website *Turnstile* is an interactive interlocking database of his own continual process of collecting and archiving through the camera, within which the viewer jumps around via hyperlinked metadata.⁹ Made up of over eight thousand photographs and seven hundred fragments of overheard conversations – all meshed together by nearly a thousand keywords – *Turnstile* is an extraordinary cultural archive of its time. Occasionally, Wills also iterated massive, almost sublimely scaled, installations from the virtual archive by printing out and installing thousands of images in wall grids he called *Wunderwalls*.

To build his archive he spent years trawling through our contemporary urban environment with his digital camera like a human driftnet. He developed a finely attuned radar for cultural objects that are so marginal, so detrital, that they barely register as artefacts at all. He taxonomised and cross-referenced this ‘cultural mulch’ using an acute historical sensibility that mixes irony with a passion for his world, as well as nostalgia with a love for the contemporary, in equal parts. The interlacing of the threads of images and information forms an on-line network vast in scale and microscopic in detail, but unified in structure.

It depicts the early twenty-first century not so much pictorially as granularly. *Turnstile* emulates the vast online archives of Corbis or Flickr, which already allow us access to numbers of images at an astronomical scale, but he disturbs their totalizing symbolic order, by combining the automatic logic of a search engine with the personal sensibility of a singular artist.

Turnstile photographically collected and archived micro-fragments of material that would otherwise fall through the cracks of history. The Canberra archaeologist and artist Ursula Frederick also used the camera to create a social and material history. A recent PhD research project at the Australian National University deployed an 'archival mode' to visually order the vast diversity of material culture she was confronted with while investigating the art and aesthetics of contemporary car culture. The archive allowed even the most tangential or ephemeral aspects of our relationship to the car to be brought into high-resolution, taxonomic focus. In a series of bound books called *Spare Parts*, presented as part of her thesis, a grid of photographs of iridescent oil stains in garages sat beside a grid of photographs of the fleshy pink upholstery of newly restored vintage cars, which sat beside a grid of car badges, which sat beside a grid of tee shirts bearing car logos, which sat beside a grid of cars under car covers, and so on. The artist/archivist's coolly panoramic, but simultaneously microscopic, gaze brought all these diverse traces of cultural and social activity together on the one isometric plane. The grids of images do not illustrate an argument going on elsewhere, they were constructed, in their internal archival architecture, to be part of the argument itself. The viewer experiences the visual correspondences and disjunctures within each typological sub set, as in David Wills' *Bananas in Pajamas (B3)*, but also across the entire system of categories. In its entirety the archive is able to manifest the absent: we do not get a direct series of portraits of car enthusiasts, but nonetheless the physical presence of the human body in relation to the car is indexed by the archive – the contours of human chests fill out the documented tee shirts, whilst the plumply restored upholstery awaits their bodies.

A Melbourne artist whose self-constructed archives of collected images are larger and broader, but at the same time pitched in a more enigmatic, poetic mode than Frederick's archaeological mode, also manifests the absent and invisible. Patrick Pound collects snapshots from junk shops and places them into idiosyncratic categories. His po-faced taxonomies draw attention to the profound individuality and uniqueness of the relationship between the anonymous photographer and their anonymous subject which is found in each image. His

exhibition *People who look dead but (probably) aren't*, is a complete installation of one of his categories of collected snapshot. *Portrait of the wind* is a collection of snapshots where dresses, beach towels and hair being blown about has been caught by various different snappers' cameras. Individually, each snapshot is still a portrait of an anonymous person from the past, collectively they manifest that elusive but eternal fact: it's always windy. This idea of the archive manifesting what is invisible was expanded in a popular wunderkammer installation Pound produced for the exhibition *Melbourne Now* at the National Gallery of Victoria in 2013. This exhibition of around three hundred objects – paintings and objects from the NGV's and Pound's own collection – manifested the concept of 'air' in various witty and poetic ways.

In these cases the art's meaning or content is potential, rather than stated. The artist becomes the implacable bureaucrat of their own desires and their own will to connect – laying the facts out equably according to rules composed and seemingly imposed from elsewhere. It is up to the viewer to navigate the archival structure, do their own aesthetic research amongst the idiosyncratic taxonomies the artist has folded into the collection, and find their own meaning. But in these cases also, the artist's work borrows some of the prestige of the archive as a complete, autonomous, and somehow authentically 'natural' structure which automatically generates meaning independent of overt authorial intention. In most of these archives the bigger they are the better they are, and statistical scale becomes important. The artist's labour becomes an aesthetic dimension in itself, and the breadth and depth of their sampling of reality underpins the authority of their statements. For pleasure to flow from unexpected congruencies or comparisons the archive needs to approach the geological scale of a landscape where the visitor can lose sight of the horizon.

The second mode of archival work that is dominant in Australia at the moment takes place within an existing archive. Some artists 'interrogate' the archive to ask questions of the historical assumptions that underpin its structure. An early example of this might be Fiona Macdonald's 1993 work *Universally Respected – How much of him is I?*. This series of elaborately framed works were photographs of late nineteenth century members of the 'Rockhampton Club', which had been physically cut into strips and interwoven with archival photographs of local women, Aborigines, Kanakas and Chinese in a process of photographic miscegenation that also evokes indigenous crafts and domestic quilts.

Other artists who re-engage the archive include Anne Ferran. Her practice has used various strategies – photographic, performative and

sculptural – to directly bring the past into the present, whilst maintaining the monumental ineffability of the past’s distance from the present. For instance in the 2003 Series 1-38, she cropped details out of a set of photographs she had found in an archive, which had originally been taken in 1948 of women inmates at the Gladesville psychiatric hospital. The metadata attached to the original photographs revealed little specific information about the lives these women were living, and Ferran’s crops into their ragged clothing, constrained body language and nervous gestures even less. But the copying and cropping emphasized their material, physical, actual presence. The fact that, whoever they were, they had in fact once indubitably existed, was liberated from the archive.

THE NATIONAL AND COMMUNITY ARCHIVES OF CANBERRA

Canberra is a city of archives. Repositories of the people’s past were placed at the very centre of the Griffins’ vision for the capital, in a ‘Capitol’ on Capital Hill, now occupied by Parliament House. Not long after the construction of Canberra began in earnest, the building of actual archives, such as the Australian War Memorial, commenced. Right from the moment of its conception, C.E.W. Bean and John Treloar envisaged the War Memorial as bicameral – an archive of records, photographs and artefacts, and a sacred space of pilgrimage.¹⁰ The success of the Memorial was followed by the National Library of Australia, The National Archives of Australia and the rest. Ringing the Lake now are vast repositories of images and objects – each in its own building, and each with its own off-site storage facility in the industrial suburbs of Mitchell or Hume to take the overflow. All of these institutions industriously produce their own exhibitions and publication. However, sometimes artists also follow their own personal ‘will to connect’ into the bowels of these national institutions.

In 1996 the director of Canberra Contemporary Art Space at the time, Trevor Smith, recognized the creative resource of these institutions and organized a project called *Archives and the Everyday*, where a range of artists worked in different Canberra institutions.¹¹ A central artist to the exhibition was David Watt (1952-1998), who continues to have an influence on many Canberra region artists to this day. Watt entered pre-existing archives of images – most notably the numerous illustrations to a 1950s children’s encyclopedia called *Knowledge* which he had loved as a child – by hand painting, drawing or carving. By copying them he transferred them into his own personal lexicon which could then be re-categorized within his own private taxonomies into poignant friezes or

tableaus of memory. In typical fashion, in the works 'Inhabiting the Archive' produced for the *Archives and the Everyday* exhibition, Watt entered the National Library of Australia's printed ephemera collection. He producing a frieze of paintings, of house fronts derived from the Library's collection of Hardies fibro house brochures from the 1940s, on hand-carved bas-relief medium density fibreboard panels which were installed along the Library's elegant façade. Into the risers of the Library's equally elegant steps he tucked hundreds of wooden paintings of shoes, meticulously copied from the Library's collection of shoe catalogues.

I was also one of the artists participating, and chose to work in the National Archives of Australia and produce an installation called *Nineteen Sixty-Three: News and Information*. I worked in the collection of the Australian News and Information Bureau, the government's general publicity and propaganda department. Recently, the NAA itself has mined the same News and Information Bureau collection for their online 'photowall' called *Faces of Australia*.¹² It invites visitors to contribute metadata to the 227 images it has selected for the online wall: 'Browse the photographs online and help us identify the people, places and dates when they were taken. You can also share a memory and order copies of the photos.' Quite a few of the images now have the participants identified, and wistful nostalgic memories have been attached. The current NAA project uses the power of the human face, gazing back at us from history, to connect the website's visitors to their past. However, my approach to the same material, when I was working with it back in 1996, was quite different. I saw my work as an idiosyncratic visual archaeology of Australia's recent past. There are about 100,000 photographs in the Australian News and Information Bureau collection. From this vast visual loam I took a 'core sample' from 1963. I chose that date because it marked the time when my personal organic memory began to intermingle with my mediated historical memory. Before that date I must share in the collective memory of all Australians which is technologically retained in photographs and film. But immediately after that date I am never quite sure where my own 'organic' memory of Australia ends and where my 'prosthetic' memory, which comes from the endless photographs, films and television I have seen about the Australia's past, begins.

I sifted through these several thousand images looking for sharp visual shards from the past. I then used a scanner to isolate and enlarge the selected details from these photographs, which I visually enhanced in a computer and outputted on an ink jet printer. I embarked on a personally Oedipal, and perhaps quixotic, mission to enter, via the

photographic archive, something, like the flesh and texture of the past – my national past. But devoid of historical event, nostalgic anecdote or compelling facial portrait. Unlike the NAA's official *Faces of Australia* I deliberately cropped most faces out of the details I used, instead concentrating on gesture, unconscious body language, the folds and creases of clothing, the juxtaposition of patterns and surfaces, the orientation of objects within architectural space, and so on. Although I presented 100 details in a rigorous grid, deliberately evoking a 'one hundred percent' archival completeness, I wanted my archive to not collect the direct historical interpellations of faces (familiar from hundreds of 'Ken Burns' style TV documentaries) but rather collect one hundred random instances of a kind of 'historical unconscious' – things that weren't significant, weren't events, weren't anecdotes and weren't directed towards a future record for posterity, but things which were nonetheless ineluctably *there*.

Canberra is an archival city not only in the sense that it houses some of the nation's biggest archives, but also because an archival presence continually pinpricks our civic space. Perhaps back in some utopian Old World, Europeans like me may have walked down urban precincts with their mixture of old and new buildings and felt a chthonic connection to time and place. But, only one hundred years old as a city and subject to staccato planning and development, contemporary Canberra, like many other Australian cities, still sits like a brittle crust on the land. We need deliberate memory markers to connect us back to the past: architectural, graphic and photographic prompts to remind us what buildings or precincts once looked like before they were transformed into the present.

This attempt to create a collective sense of place and time is increasingly becoming both photographic and archival. For instance archival photographs are now researched, copied reproduced and irrupted into our streets on signboards, to be more or less ignored by passers by. Sometimes marginalised urban precincts, seen in need of a relevance injection, are embellished with evidence from the archive, applied to exterior surfaces as murals for instance, which hopefully reminds people that they are walking through a place in which a rich, deep, geographically and culturally specific heritage is maintained, rather than just another new cookie-cutter development, the same as the last one.

Similarly, in acts of national commemoration the archive, and in particular the archival photograph, is replacing other modes of memorialization, such as allegory, symbol, prayer or song. Since an archival photograph from the Australian War Memorial's collection of

Australian troops waiting to be evacuated by helicopter was etched into the polished granite wall of the Vietnam Memorial of 1992, many other memorials such as the Australian Services Nurses National Memorial (1999), the Royal Australian Air Force Memorial (2002), and Reconciliation Place (2001), have followed its lead in reproducing the momentary slice of time of the photograph within various ageless, either vitreous or lithic, surfaces. In these memorials the sharp shards of the photographically specific adds piquancy to the generic mise en scene of the nationally commemorative.



Anzac Day Dawn Service, Canberra, 2013

Lately, also, Canberra's national memorial architecture is increasingly becoming a screen for the projection of archival photographs. Charles Bean had always put a library of photographs at the heart of his conception for the future Australian War Memorial. But I doubt that even he could have imagined the outside walls of the Memorial becoming a screen for the projection of Archival photographs in the lead-up to the Dawn Service, as happened in 2013. In Canberra the way that high-resolution high-lumen projection technologies or new digital printing technologies are able to open new commemorative interfaces with the archive is on stark display.

For these reasons it was perhaps inevitable that photographs should feature in the ACT Bushfire Memorial, which opened in 2006, three years after the fires. Because of my interest in re-using archival photographs I



Australian Capital Territory Bushfire Memorial

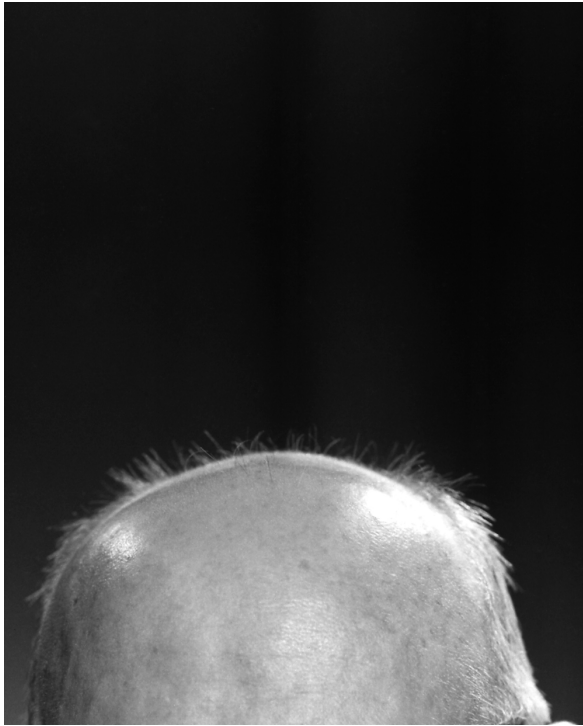
was invited to submit a proposal to design the proposed Memorial, I teamed up with Canberra public artists Tess Horwitz and Tony Steele and together we designed a memorial which combined landscaping and sculptural forms, a standard memorial wall, and also an outdoor ‘archive’ of community photographs. We held two ‘sausage sizzle’ days where victims of the fires came in to meet the artists and look at our maquette, as well as inscribe a brick for the memorial wall. They also had the opportunity to show me the photographs they had taken on the day of the fires and in the aftermath leading to their recovery. I got a scan of the photos I liked, and got them to fill out a sheet giving me copyright permission and relevant metadata.

One of the textural themes of the Memorial was the humble house brick, so I cut out three hundred brick-sized details from my scans and laid them out vertically into five columns. The images were then digitally printed inside annealed plate glass, and erected as five, four-metre high glass columns around a reflective pool. The palette of the photographs ran from earthy and fiery tones at the bottom, up to images of people and incidents at eye level, and then on to the greens and blues of regeneration towards the sky. Captions giving the photographer’s name and a short title were placed in the ‘mortar’ between the images.

To me, this memorial is unique because, rather than choosing one image to be iconically embody the whole experience of the event being memorialized, as in the Vietnam Memorial, or creating an impressionistic collage of different elements, as in the Nurses or Air Force memorials, in the Bushfire Memorial individually captioned and identifiable photographs, albeit details of them, are presented in a grid which retains their individual specificity. I think this approach worked because the victims were all fairly homogenous – middle-class suburbanites with cameras. As well, the disaster was relatively concentrated and coherent in its narrative meaning – ‘fire comes, community suffers but regenerates’ – with only some minor counter-narratives around the financial culpability of various governments. The approach I used, of presenting a finite archive or recognizable photographs still denotatively attached to a variety of personal events, may not have worked in memorials to more complex disasters, or addressing more heterogeneous constituencies.

The invitation to contribute a work to the exhibition *Shaping Canberra*, at the ANU School of Art Gallery allowed me to think about Canberra from a different direction. As a resident of Canberra, in my imagination I have always divided the history of my city into two rough periods. To me there has seemed to be the ‘utopian’ period, from its foundation to self-government in the late 1980s, where the Commonwealth Government used Canberra as a model of an ideal Australian polity, and a kind of ideal template for a future Australian city. During this period, which in my imagination peaks in the architecture and design of the 1960s, Canberra, it can be argued, was still tolerated by most Australians as a noble experiment. Then there is the dystopian period from self-government till now, where Canberra is regarded by Australians and governments alike as parasitical, perverse, pretentious, indulgent and ‘out of touch’.

In both these imaginary Canberras there seem, to me, to be no actual, fully embodied people. In the dystopian Canberra of today the people who live here seem to be often despised within the national imagination as a vitiated, degenerated, foppish sub-category of the real Australian. In the national mediascape we often appear to be people of literally no account, as I heard Clive Palmer complain one day on my car radio: ‘In Canberra they have the best roads, but nobody to drive on them’. However, the utopian Canberra was also devoid of actual flesh and blood people, the few people that appear in the photographs are national cyphers, actors in a political fantasy, like the schematic figures that occur in architectural drawings.



Martyn Jolly, (above) Bald Head (below) Kids Feet



For my installation *Citizens of Canberra* I collected tourist brochures and National Capital Development Commission publications from the utopian period of Canberra, making my own archive. Using an 'Office Works' aesthetic I covered up the generic photographs with coloured sheets of A4 paper, obscuring the various civic vistas of national potentiality but revealing hapless pedestrians or passers by accidentally caught in the photographer's camera, each reproduced no bigger than the size of my finger nail, thereby pulling them out of their unwitting role as national cyphers and perhaps returning to them their individuality as people.

THE REVENANT POWER OF THE ARCHIVE AND INDIGENOUS ARTISTS

So far the artists I have discussed have adopted a coolly distant, even ironic, stance to their archives. However, some artists invest the archives they use with an additional valency, where the archive seems to acquire its own power, its own personality, and its own presence. Far from being inert or passive, it seems to have an almost autonomous agency to conceal or reveal, to generate spectres or exhale miasmic atmospheres.

The most popular photographic archive in Australia by far is the Justice and Police Museum archive of 130,000 police photographs. It has spawned exhibitions at the Justice and Police Museum itself; history books by Peter Doyle; a men's clothing range by Ralph Lauren; the production design of documentaries like *Utopia Girls*; and, not least, inspiration for artists.¹³ For over ten years the Sydney artists Ross Gibson and Kate Richards have made works based on the collection under the general title of 'Life After Wartime', this has included performances with a live soundtrack and generated haikus at the Opera House, as well as various computer coded interactive installations and site specific projections in the windows of an old house at The Rocks.¹⁴

Writing in 1999 Gibson acknowledged that he felt a kind of occult power coming from the archive:

Whenever I work with historical fragments, I try to develop an aesthetic response appropriate to the form and mood of the source material. This is one way to know what the evidence is trying to tell the future. I must not impose some pre-determined genre on these fragments. I need to remember that the evidence was created by people and systems of reality independent of myself. The archive holds knowledge in excess of my own predispositions... Stepping off from this intuition, I have to trust that the archive has occulted in it a logic, a coherent pattern which

can be ghosted up from its disparate details so that I can gain a new, systematic understanding of the culture that has left behind such spooky detritus. In this respect I am looking to be a medium for the archive. I want to 'séance up' the spirit of the evidence.¹⁵

In seeking to be a voodoo spiritualist 'medium' for the archive, Gibson was not trying to quote from it, or mine it for retro tidbits ripe for appropriation, so much as to make contact with it as an autonomous netherworld of images.

Indigenous Australians have always had the strongest stake in our photographic archives. As early as 1986 Tracey Moffat was entering into direct and explicit dialogue with J. W. Lindt's photographs in her series *Some Lads*, where her sexy dancers playfully appropriated, parodied and reflected back the stiff colonial gaze built into Lindt's studio tableaux.

However, as Aboriginal activism grew in intensity and sophistication during the 1980s and 1990s, anthropological portraits began to be conceived of not only as the theoretical paradigm for colonial attempts at genocide, but also as acts of violence in themselves, technically akin to, and instrumentally part of, that very process of attempted genocide. They began to be used by young Indigenous artists to 'occult up' their ancestors.

Rather than just creating a feeling of active dialogue with past photographs, these new forms of indigenous reuse attempted to use photography to create a two-way corridor through time, a sense of temporal channelling back to the actual subjects of the photographs. For instance, in a meditation on the archive of nineteenth-century anthropological photographs left behind by the Northern Territory policeman Paul Foelsche, the indigenous photographer and curator Brenda L. Croft felt she was almost in a dialogue with the subjects of the 140-year-old portraits:

Images like these have haunted me since I was a small child... [and] were instrumental in guiding me to use the tools of photography in my work... The haunted faces of our ancestors challenge and remind us to commemorate them and acknowledge their existence, to help lay them, finally, to rest.¹⁶

But, rather than laying their ancestors to rest, many other Indigenous artists have photographically raised them from the dead to enrol them in various contemporary campaigns of resistance.

Most recently Brook Andrew has worked in the personal archive mode, curating a 2012 exhibition for the Museum of Contemporary Art called *Taboo*, where racist imagery from around the world was gathered together into a cabinet of curiosities. Prior to this, in the mid 1990s, Andrew had made some of the most iconographic imagery re-using archival photographs. In a series of works, Brook Andrew invested his nineteenth-century subjects, copied from various state archives, with a libidinous body image inscribed within the terms of contemporary queer masculinity, and emblazoned them with defiant Barbara Kruger-esque slogans such as *I Split Your Gaze* (1997), *Ngajuu Ngaay Nginduugirr [I See You]* (1998) and *Sexy and Dangerous* (1996). Andrew exploited the auratic power of the original Aboriginal subjects to re-project the historically objectifying gaze straight back to the present, to be immediately re-inscribed in a contemporary politico-sexual discourse. Although Andrew was criticized for using the powerful portraits of the Aboriginal subjects without appropriate consideration for their original tribal and geographical identity, these works have since become almost iconic in contemporary Australian art.

Before Andrew's conscription of historical Aborigines via the archive, another indigenous artist, Leah King Smith's 1992 exhibition *Patterns of Connection* also used the archive to raise revenant images. To make her large, deeply coloured photo-compositions she copied anthropological photographs from the State Library of Victoria, liberating them from the archive to be superimposed as spectral presences on top of hand-coloured landscapes. For her, this process allowed Aboriginal people to flow back into their land, into a virtual space reclaimed for them by the photographer. In the words of the exhibition's catalogue: 'From the flaring of velvety colours and forms, translucent ghosts appear within a numinous world.'¹⁷

King-Smith held spiritualist beliefs which she enacted in her photographs. She concluded her artist's statement by asking that 'people activate their inner sight to view Aboriginal people.'¹⁸ Her work animistically gave the archival photographs she reused a spiritualist function. Some of her fellow indigenous artists thought the work too generalist. It lacked specific knowledge of the stories of the people whose photographs were reused, and it didn't have explicit permission from the traditional owners of the land they were made to haunt. But the critic Anne Marsh described that as a 'strategic essentialism':

There is little doubt, in my mind, that Leah King-Smith is a kind of New Age evangelist and many serious critics will dismiss her work on these grounds... But I am interested in why the images are so popular and how they tap into a kind of cultural imaginary [in order] to conjure the ineffable... Leah King-Smith's figures resonate with a constructed aura: [they are] given an enhanced ethereal quality through the use of mirrors and projections. The 'mirror with a memory' comes alive as these ancestral ghosts... seem to drift through the landscape as a seamless version of nineteenth century spirit photography.¹⁹

A new-age spirituality also permeates the recent work of the Indigenous artist Christian Thompson. As part of a large Australian Research Council project returning digital copies of nineteenth century ethnographic portraits back to the communities from which they came, he was invited to work on the collection of nineteenth century photographs held in one of the most famous anthropological archives in the world, the Pitt Rivers Museum at Oxford. The curator of photographs at the Pitt Rivers Museum, Christopher Morton, identifies the original photographs as artefacts – indexical impressions on aged paper and emulsion as distinct from their reproducibility as images – on the same continuum as the actual remains – the skulls or bones – of aborigines. He says:

But in the case of archives – and in particular photographs – those ancestors held in the images remain in the storerooms of remote institutions even after copies have been returned or shared online. The reproducibility of the photographic image means that the surface information it holds can easily be shared, especially in the digital age. But the images of ancestors, as ethnographic studies around the world now show us, are more than the chemical traces of light on a surface – they have a direct and spiritual connection to the person photographed, and so hold significant spiritual and emotional qualities. It is this creative tension, between the archive as a permanent ancestral resting place, and yet as a reproducible, re-codable, and dynamic historical resource, that lies at the heart of Thompson's concept of the exhibition space as a spiritual zone.²⁰

For his part Christian Thompson saw his role as an artist in shamanistic terms:

I wanted to generate an aura around this series, a meditative space that was focused on freeing oneself of hurt, employing crystals and other votive objects that emit frequencies that can heal, ward off negative energies, psychic attack, geopathic stress and electro magnetic fields, and, importantly, transmit ideas... I asked the photographs in the Pitt Rivers Museum to be catalysts and waited patiently to see what ideas and images would surface in the work, I think with surprising results. Perhaps this is what art is able to do, perform a 'spiritual repatriation' rather than a physical one, fragment the historical narrative and traverse time and place to establish a new realm in the cosmos, set something free, allow it to embody the past and be intrinsically connected to the present?

In works like these the conventional ability of the archival photograph to index the past is invested with an additional force by Indigenous artists keenly feeling their historical deracination from a traditional past which is, in its turn, invested with a mythic value.

Another example in this mode of intergenerational animism is the drawings which Vernon Ah Kee exhibited at the State Library of Queensland in 2012, based on the Tindale collection of aboriginal portraits taken in the 1930s. For many years this archive has been a genealogical resource for Aboriginal people trying to stitch back together the torn connections to their siblings, parents and grandparents. But in *Transforming Tindale* Ah Kee re-drew the photographic portraits of his own family members. Through the loving ministrations of his soft pencil-graphite the images were humanized, transformed from 'ethnographic samples' or 'genealogical evidence' to 'human portraits'.²¹

CONCLUSION

Archival art has been a major presence in Australian art for thirty years, permeating all aspects of our visual culture.²² And the photograph has become, if not the exclusive, then certainly a more central artefact to contemporary archival art because, as a piece of yellowing paper and cracking indexical emulsion, it can manifest an obdurate, almost bodily, materiality, whereas as pure image it can also enter a delirious virtual fungibility, as for instance it is fleetingly projected onto monumental walls.

The archival impulse has driven a wide range of Australian artists. At one end of the spectrum, Indigenous artists have interrogated the

archive, and increased its indexical power to evoke the presence of specific ancestors from our colonial past within the present. At the other end of the spectrum, other artists use archival structures to reconnect the dislodged and free-floating meanings of random and dislocated photographs in order to create new, witty, semantic structures. Many important Australian archival artists have been left out of my sketches, most notably the work of migrant artists, such as Elizabeth Gertsakis for instance, where the archive is used to force alternate and parallel histories into the dominant national story. But these omitted artists could also readily fit into the spectrum.

If the archival mode has been important over the last thirty years, it will only continue to become more important in the next thirty years. In the fifteen years since Lev Manovich wrote *The Language of New Media*, in which he identified the database with its operations of searching, navigating and viewing as the new-media correlate to the novel and cinema with their operations of narrative storytelling, databases have only increased in scale, complexity and ubiquity – at an exponential rate – as is the case with all technologies.²³

Archives are being uncovered or created at an unprecedented rate, digitized at an unprecedented rate, and made searchable at an unprecedented rate. Within the digital humanities new ways of interrogating the archive, new ways of searching metadata, and new ways of presenting iterations from the archive, such as more complex data visualizations, are being developed.²⁴ At the same time photographs are manifesting themselves in a wider range of material substances – etched in stone or glass, printed on cloth or metal, projected on walls and buildings, and sliding along LED arrays or screens. But the story isn't all about the seductions of new media. The more artists and historians such as myself work in this area, the more we realize that there are still troves and troves of objects and images, laid down in all their recalcitrant materiality by those who came before us, just waiting to be rediscovered and rearticulated.

ENDNOTES

1 Gareth Hutchens, 'Pitch Perfect: cricket tragic records 25,000 DVDs worth of game time', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 18 January 2014, p10.

2 See for instance websites like: <http://www.messynessychic.com/>.

3 See fairfaxsyndication.com.

4 See for instance the online collected repository of newspaper articles Trove, or the National Library of Australia's Commons on Flickr. Collecting institutions are also beginning to experiment with data visualization techniques and data mining techniques, see for instance <http://visiblearchive.blogspot.com.au/>, accessed 25 February 2014.

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- 5 The Eindhoven University of Technology and UTS research project Materialising Memories has found that the poor design of our burgeoning personal digital archives may be inhibiting personal memory: <http://www.materialisingmemories.com/>.
 - 6 See for instance: Rebecca Comay (ed), *Lost in the Archives*, Alphabet City Media, Toronto, 2002; Sven Spieker, *The Big Archive: Art from Bureaucracy*, Massachusetts, MIT Press, Cambridge, 2008; Okwui Enwezor, *Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art*, International Centre for Photography, New York, 2008.
 - 7 Charles Merewether (ed), *The Archives: Documents of Contemporary Art*, Whitechapel and MIT Press, London, 2006.
 - 8 <http://turnstile.net.au/gallery/11>, accessed 25 February 2014.
 - 9 <http://turnstile.net.au/>, accessed 25 February 2014.
 - 10 Michael McKernan, *Here is Their Spirit: A History of the Australian War Memorial*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1991.
 - 11 Trevor Smith, *Archives and the Everyday*, Canberra Contemporary Art Space, 1997, including Anne Brennan, Barbara Campbell, John Citizen/Gordon Bennett, Fiona Hall, Marty Jolly, Robert MacPherson, Susan Norrie and David Watt.
 - 12 <http://www.naa.gov.au/collection/snapshots/faces/faces/photoWall.html>, accessed 25 February 2014.
 - 13 Peter Doyle, *City of Shadows: Sydney Police Photographs 1912-1948*, Historic Housing Trust of New South Wales, Sydney, 2005; Georgina Safe, 'Crimes of fashion: gangsters turn heads again', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 30 November 2011; Clare Wright, *Utopia Girls: How Women Won the Vote*, 2012.
 - 14 <http://www.lifeafterwartime.com/>, accessed 25 February 2014.
 - 15 R. Gibson, 'Negative Truth: A new approach to photographic storytelling', *Photofile*, vol 58, 1999, p30.
 - 16 B. L. Croft, 'Laying ghosts to rest', in *Portraits of Oceania*, J. Annear (ed), Sydney, 1997, pp9; 14.
 - 17 J. Phipps, 'Elegy, Meditation and Retribution', in *Patterns Of Connection*, Victorian Centre for Photography, Melbourne, 1992, np.
 - 18 L. King-Smith, 'Statement', in *Patterns of Connection*.
 - 19 A. Marsh, 'Leah King-Smith and the Nineteenth Century Archive', *History of Photography*, vol 23, no 2, 1999, p117.
 - 20 Spiritual repatriation and the archive in Christian Thompson's *We Bury Our Own* (Catalogue essay to *We Bury our Own*); Christian Thompson, Artists statement at: <http://www.prm.ox.ac.uk/christianthompson.html>, accessed 25 February 2014.
 - 21 <http://www.slq.qld.gov.au/showcase/transforming-tindale>, accessed 25 February 2014.
 - 22 See for instance the *Art Monthly* issue, 'Mining the Archive', Zara Stanhope (ed), vol 19, no 1, 1999.
 - 23 Lev Manovich, 'Database', *Language of New Media*, MIT Press, Cambridge Mass, 2001.
 - 24 Examples, amongst many, of data visualizations include Lev Manovich's projects such as 'Phototrails' at: <http://manovich.net/index.php/exhibitions/phototrails>, accessed 1 September 2014. Examples, amongst many, of projects within the digital humanities include 'The Digital Panopticon' at: <http://www.digitalpanopticon.org/>, accessed 1 September 2014.