

PERFECT

STRANGERS

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THE THINGS THAT BILL SEES

Blair French

That the space of photography is a site of the self's sacrifice means that whoever or whatever enters this space is always something else.

(Eduardo Cadava, *Words of Light*, 1997)

An artist friend recently introduced me to a work by New York photographer Tim Maul. This small, rather humble yet elegant artist book entitled *traces & presence* (Paris: éditions Florence Loewy, 1999) is composed of uncanny black and white photographs (one per page) of empty, apparently meaningless scenes: boarded-up windows, dead-end alleys, half-open doorways, kerbsides dissecting shafts of light, blurred wiremesh fencing-off children's playgrounds, empty stairwells, an abandoned shoe, rusting fire escapes, shop windows, streetsigns, a pedestrian-crossing, a parked van, a mattress propped against a fence, and an impenetrable, unyielding surface of water. These could almost be stage sets for the classic American documentary scene, but voided people—the ostensible subjects of that tradition. In another sense this work brings to mind the forensic insinuations of photography deployed by artists such as Irishmen Willie Doherty and Paul Seawright in their images of the banal sites—the street corners, pub doorways, laneways and hedgerows—at which massive historical and political forces have compressed and detonated in immediate, vicious acts. Or furthermore, there's something of Atget's Parisian streets in these images, as if we have here details from the edges and corners or from beneath the imperfect resolution of those old prints, a close inspection for traces of bodies erased from the boulevards. All these resonances hold yet are also resisted by the images. For these photographs are in fact most directly implicated within a lineage of spirit photography. As Maul writes in his introduction they are the result of his attempt to free up his practice from the conventions, intentions and desires that had previously informed it by giving over immediate control of what he photographed to somebody else:

Through a neighbourhood newspaper I contacted a psychic who lived nearby, and who was willing, for a fee, to spend a few afternoons with me. I'll call him Bill! What impressed me about Bill was how unimpressed he was with me and with my project. For many years, he told me, he had privately believed himself insane, having always heard and seen oddly dressed people that weren't visible to anyone else but him...Not once did he ever use the word "gift" with me in describing his psychic sense. He seemed wary and just a little paranoid. As we strolled along, I asked him to point out to me people who weren't there, and to allow me the time to take a picture...Bill felt that strong, negative emotions left "traces" upon a thing or place; I generally agreed with this although I

never felt anything. Every few minutes he would gesture towards a "presence" usually a spirit going through daily routines over and over like a record stuck on one phrase...

Given the wilful absurdity at play here it's easy to be dismissive of such a project. Yet in many respects it's an exemplary distillation of the photographic act itself in all its complexities and contradictions—its constant state of oscillation between presence and absence, the visible and invisible, science and magic, now and then, here and there. And somewhere in this play always the constant writing into visual being of a subject previously unformed or adrift, a subject simultaneously called forth *and* displaced at its very point of visualisation. Photographing to no particular purpose (or photographing absence, photographing the invisible) has always been at the core of the photographic. Every image is both conjured by and creates its own absence. Every photograph is a questioning not only of the world that it pictures, but also that which is absent from or invisible within that world (which might, as on the occasion of Maul's book, be said to be its true subject.) Maul's empty streets bespeak not only the unfathomable subjectivity of some invisible presence, but the tangible traces of their absences. Who boarded-up that window? Whose shoe is that? Who lived there? Who used that hose? Who has travelled these waters? Who lies under their surface? What stories have these subjects left behind? To what effect this withdrawing from the image? Or more accurately, this image's double action of donation and withdrawal? But perhaps most crucially: Will these stories ever be known via photography? Or will they be forever blocked by the image? Does our adherence to this visual mode of questioning and proclaiming knowledge come with certain conditions, certain restrictions on the modes of subjectivity (and communality) open to us? Maul's book sits in that particular and evocative strand of photography—the strand that seeks to photograph, or cast as visible the invisible. And thus it indicates the very insatiability of photography whilst casting in relief the question obliquely accompanying every photographic image: Why photograph? (Why *this* photograph?) There is surely only one final response—to photograph again, and again.

Which might be why as someone who rarely ventures either side of the camera (perhaps wary of the someone else I might become either side of this encounter, those elements both brought forth and suppressed) whenever I'm faced with the photograph and the imperative to write of or in accompaniment of it I'm always overly conscious of the very question: Write of what? Of 'it'? The world it takes purchase from? Its writing in and of the world? What can words add to this? What shifts in register might words implement? If we are someone else before the camera, within the image, if we really believe that cogeny of the photograph to slip us into otherness, surely how futile the word.

Little of the work within this exhibition is akin to Maul's project in any immediately apparent way, focused as it is in the main upon figures, upon human subjects in their encounters with or before the camera, their acts of becoming within and as the image. But there is something of a link here in a concentration upon those transformations of subjectivity that take place in photography. In Maul's work this takes the anti-form of absence; in much of the work within this exhibition it is ostensibly, even overtly staged or presented in the visual.

PERFECT STRANGERS is in fact partially sourced in an earlier exhibition—*Agency*—organised for the Australian Centre for Photography, Sydney as part of *Australian Perspectives '99: Living Here Now—Art & Politics*. That exhibition was concerned with relations between camera technologies and social or representational agency (the question, for example, of whether the camera or camera image can be used to effect any form of change in contemporary society). A number of the participating artists took this as an opportunity to develop work examining the manner in which contemporary experiences of public and private spheres become blurred within and via cultures of the image. A handful of critics saw aspects of this work as evidencing a confusion of the personal with the political, as if one immediately activated the other. But this criticism set aside the investments of the artists within the worlds they were imaging (investments extending, prior to image-making, beyond the immediate and personal). Even more crucially, however, it implicitly denied comprehension on the part



Sandy Nicholson, from *Lifts*, 1998-2000

of the artists of the attenuated relations between image and world, the tenuous character of the subjectivities formed within the work, and the foregrounding within the work of its own constant oscillation between nearness (the contact or touching of social world by and via the image) and distance (the separation of image from world). Whilst no conscious refutation of these critiques in either conception or form—the exhibition was initiated prior to their appearance—*Perfect Strangers* does, I hope, complicate such readings of the image.

This exhibition, in turn, is motivated by a desire to focus more specifically upon the utilisation of camera technologies to stage encounters between the individual, private figure and public space, and between the individual and the camera itself. Immersed within image-saturated cultures the artists included here seek to highlight that increasing confusion of private and public spheres which occurs as each collapse into the other via ubiquitous modes of photographic representation. Engaging with ideas of pose, of masquerade, of performance, of witness and record as they transact across increasingly contingent boundaries of public and private, fact and artifice these artists question who we become in the necessarily public register of the photographic—this public register of memory and history. How do our daily encounters with and as perfect strangers—encounters in both material and representational space—construct our experiences and understanding of a society, a culture? How and why do we present ourselves as perfect strangers before the camera? How do these moments of presentation—of photographic imaging—cohere into both psychological and social subjectivity? What do we presence before the camera? What do we withdraw in barely acknowledged collusion with its actions?



School Monument by ALEX KERSHAW is a single large scale print of the whole student body of a private boys' school. Literally hundreds of young faces—all topping the same uniform—mesh across the surface of the photograph like the dot-screen of a print, each significant here only in their relational contribution to the collective whole, the 'student body'. In *Tourist Monument* Kershaw presents a set of snapshot-like images of visitors to a public square in China, all standing on the same spot, posing for another camera (their own, or that of a loved one) in order to document their act of good faith, of pilgrimage according to a tradition promising good fortune. But what is all this to us as outside onlookers? Or even to the photographer for whom these subjects are *not* posing? How different are the personas we create of the images from those constructed by the subjects for their own gaze?

Kershaw lives and works in Sydney. He held his first solo exhibition, *Thoroughbred*, at Herringbone Gallery, Sydney in 1999, and exhibited in the 1999 *Photo-Technica New Photo-Artist Award* Exhibition at ACP. His work has also been included in group exhibitions at First Draft Gallery, Sydney, 1999, University of New South Wales, 1999, TAP Gallery, Sydney, 1998, and Tasmanian School of Art, 1998.

WORKS: *Tourist Monument*, 1999, 42 type-c prints, each 30 x 20cm.
School Monument, 1999, hp uv inkjet print, 87 x 470cm.

Tourist Monument, 1999, type-c print