

# A surfeit of style

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The phenomenal proliferation of photographic images lining the walls of galleries would seem to suggest that photography is the healthiest of present-day art forms. Indeed contemporary art appears ever more defined by the structures of the photographic, a condition we may trace to its persistent urge to maintain some purchase upon social experience. Photography is art's ticket to social relevance. It provides easy access to 'content', apparently facilitating [or pretending] acts of cultural commentary whilst readily deploying the very tactics of visual seduction honed within the ubiquitous commercial realms of contemporary visual culture. Critical self-reflection and commentary tend to get intertwined with self-promotion. And herein, perhaps, lies one reason why so much so-called 'post-conceptual' photo-art of the present moment appears to offer itself up for immediate comprehension far too easily: such a bottomed-out notion of accessibility combined with an over-abundance of visual frisson or the ubiquitous pleasuring diversions of spectacle culture lies at the cold heart of our media-sales age.

One can hardly blame artists for exploiting the communicative tools and tactics of the day, particularly younger artists for whom the amorphous realm of globalised media culture forms a core feature of the very environment in which they have matured. The issue at stake is rather to what purposes this deployment of the forms and language of our fundamentally photogenic culture works. To what extent are contemporary photo-artists adopting a classic avant-gardist position of being both resolutely of their time [operating from within and concentrating the core conditions of the age] and yet ahead or out of step with it, engaging in acts of critical commentary upon the dominant tenets of mainstream culture from its margins? Or to what extent do their images appear fundamentally orientated towards claiming a market share within an image culture of casual diversion? To what extent are they visually seductive above all else? A strict answer is of course difficult enough to arrive at with regard to single images let alone an artist's overall



Top image: Alex Kershaw, *Geodetic Monuments: Table Rock*, 2001–2002. Photo courtesy the artist  
Bottom image: Vanilla Netto, *Outside Chemical and Physical Boundaries [Detected by Interferometers]: Ball Guy – Catch*, 2001. Photo courtesy the artist



practice. So the purpose of the question is instead to highlight two trajectories or impulses that seem to me to frequently exist within an individual work, or that more generally serve to define the frequently contradictory critical economy within which photo-art in Australia is currently produced.

That old modernist trope of the interplay between form and content has returned as the core mechanism through which the work of contemporary photo-artists is frequently considered [and through which it is indeed generated]. Except that now for 'form' read 'style'. It's a pretty easy exercise to run through a whole range of currently celebrated yet otherwise disparate photo-art practices and characterise the work by this key marriage of readily identifiable content and photographic treatment or style, resulting in the creation of an artistic signature. Thinking of a particular loose generation of photo-artists, the ongoing practices of Cherine Fahd, Deborah Paauwe, Darren Siwes and Darren Sylvester all announce themselves around such a nexus. All produce very different 'looking' and instantly recognisable work, yet the appeal of each depends to a large extent on a similar fundamental fusion of content with a specific 'hook' and a signature 'look' – a style. This is what a particular moment in art practice appears to have primarily sourced from photography, and how it [the resulting photo-art] garners attention. Of course, I'm writing really here about that latter issue – the means by which certain forms of current photographic practices attract notice. After all, this relation can serve to generate and present work of some complexity and significance [as it has done throughout the history of art] – just perhaps not often enough at the present.

This style/content relation can also be rearticulated in the form of a key tension running through much photo-art and accompanying commentary of the last decade – the simultaneous fetishisation of the 'look' of the photographic [a sense of self-conscious visual style generated out of an acute awareness of both photographic history and its current public forms] and emphatic reassertion of photography's defining relationship to the real in all its guises [social, environmental, psychoanalytical, etc.].

According to popular wisdom we exist in a post-theoretical creative climate. Theory has been discredited as a kind of indulgent furphy and the photographic image freed to resume its compulsive tracings of the real and its endless narrativisations. If viewed as an entity unto itself then perhaps this is an appropriate treatment of 'theory'. But it is far more appropriate to think of theory in terms of models of analysis and understanding generated in close conjunction with the world of images. And so this impulse to analysis has also suffered. Too frequently the place of complex formal and social analysis of images is taken by a mix of reference to content [treating the worlds both in and of the image at the level of surface appearance only], declaration of affinities to popular media culture [an assertion of cultural credibility at the level of style] and loose allusions to photographic history. The result is a sort of join the dots criticism that seeks to account for the extraordinary proliferation of photographic forms through the catch-all categories of popular culture and the diversity of real experience. Even worse is the

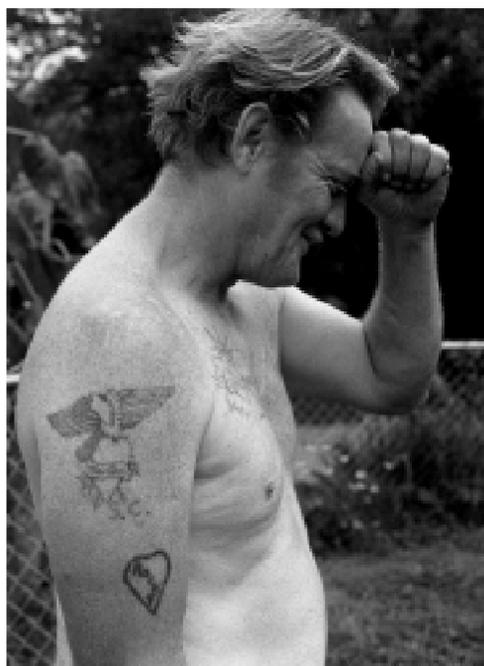
press release mode of criticism that openly treats photographic images at 'face' value, rarely analysing their specific networks of constitution [beyond obviously signalled references], their construction of social subjects, treatment of viewing subjects and material forms. With notable exceptions, current photo commentary rather seems to deliberately sidestep the type of core questions I outlined in my opening. Very rarely is the question 'why' asked [with persistence] of photographic images, or even 'how' [with any appropriate scepticism]. When they are, the answers remain couched in assertions of a new humanism, or a new populism. And these together give new form to an old contradiction within which the sovereignty and autonomy of the photograph is fiercely defended. The photograph offers inviolable evidence of real human experience. But photographic content, implicitly, is never enough. Style must enter the equation to lift the image from the mundane morass of images circulating the globe, to attract attention, to sell the content.

Possibly the most significant contradiction of the moment occurs when this dependency on style and the mock popularism of commercial visual culture intersects with the increasing references to humanism in current photo commentary. Humanism, one might think, could for all its soporific passivity be pitched as a palliative reaction to the rampant individualism of spectacle society. Rather, it appears that the two are taken to coexist in relative comfort. The new humanism is to be located within the marketplace of the visual, perhaps to authenticate its realms of experience. But surely, whilst the realm of style conscious, commercially driven visual culture may well constitute a new form of the real – a key determinant of human experience – this does not by necessity make it a humanist realm in any understanding of the term.

One recent discussion of humanism in contemporary photography is to be found in curator Judy Annear's catalogue essay accompanying *Others*, an exhibition of three early career Sydney-based photo-artists at the Level 2 contemporary art project space at the Art Gallery of New South Wales. According to Annear these artists – Harold David, Alex Kershaw and Vanila Netto – all "use the camera... to humanise rather than analyse". She goes on to state that "none have a specific political or theoretical framework supporting their work", and yet she allows that "all are informed... by past theoretical and photographic practices" just as they are "by the direct experience of popular culture in its multitude of forms." Further on Annear discusses a so-called new photographic humanism in some detail, and stresses in addition direct communication or intimacy [again rather than social analysis or activism] and connection to the real as core features of the work of each of the exhibited artists. Yet at the same time she references the fantastical and imaginative quality of one set of work and traces the genealogy of another within an analytic framework of conceptual typology within European art. In other words, a dispersed and at times contradictory and confusing proliferation of frameworks is introduced in order it would seem to match the diversity of the featured works, and to somehow attempt the impossible – to cast a net over the extraordinary range of impulses, forms and trajectories of contemporary photo-art.

There's a danger evident I think that humanism in its current usage provides a convenient but misleading catch-all concept that enables the writer/viewer to skirt around the constitution of specific subjects within vastly different representational forms and instances. To her credit, however, Annear provides a rather thorough historical contextualisation of this and other frameworks within photographic history. Moreover, one might be able to read Annear's essay as an attempt to introduce a swathe of photographic tendencies through the work of these three artists, or conversely to acknowledge the seriousness of each of their projects through reference to these bigger picture issues. In the end I don't think that the artists' work is served well by either approach, but there is at least a commitment to historically embedded modes of analysis taking place here.

As for the actual bodies of work, that of Harold David fits most comfortably within the notions of humanism and intimacy that Annear outlines. His images of the inhabitants of a small American town on the wrong side of the economic boom of the 1990s ease comfortably into a double tradition of socially conscious American documentary and more recent insider or subcultural documentary where subjects, photographer and viewer all appear to accede to some form of performative interaction. A sort of grunge chic meets heart-wrenching social confrontation in an image of a young girl standing in mud staring back at the camera from behind a barbed wire fence. There are moments of real emotive tension in this work – images of and as subjects that refuse visual consumption. On the other hand, the overtly ballsy attitude imbued within some of the images, their carefully studied offhand performability and the contrived informality of their poor tonality and loose pinning to the wall all smacks of stylistic convention – a shorthand 'authenticity' generated in the recent collusion of photo-essay and lifestyle magazine that in the end limits the potential reach of the images.

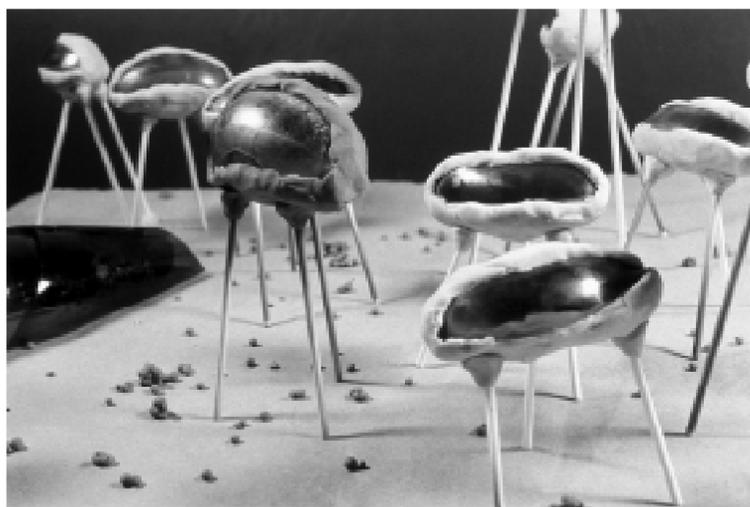


Alex Kershaw's work is vastly different, although the appellation 'documentary' may also be applied. His five large colour images of geodetic monuments standing like sentinels over the landscape draw heavily on the typological structures of certain strands of European photography. Unfortunately for a body of work that really hinges on the evocation and analysis of systematic structures of vision, the relationship between the images – the building of a typology – is overwhelmed by the scale of the images that drives towards visual seduction. Rather than constituting a representational system the works are emphatically singular and as a result their subjects far too easily treated in anthropomorphic terms, which in fact significantly limits their potential interest and meaning as images.

If Kershaw's work is lost somewhat in the seduction of scale, the exact opposite is the case with Vanila Netto's indeterminate unfolding storyboard of tiny photographs of strange hyper-saturated built environments and enigmatic figures. Netto constructs her scenes and figures from simple, discarded materials. Some are fascinating, others simply diverting; all conjure the fantasy worlds of utopian animations or the dramas unfolding across the bedroom floors of children. Popular culture certainly plays strongly here. And in a strange way – in its partial genesis in a micro-symbolic world of the early imagination – this work comes closest to an actual communion with the real as understood in psychoanalytic terms. But it is also clearly informed by both photographic history's ongoing byway fascination with dolls, models and the animation of the inanimate, as well as post-conceptual art's recurring substitutions of the categories of fact and fiction.

All three bodies of work display an abiding self-awareness of photographic history and theory. Like so much work being produced today all are far too self-conscious of their analytical capabilities within specific representational frameworks [even if this is revealed, perversely, in attempts at elision of this character] to be usefully [or accurately] served by categorisation as humanist. All are rendered so as to draw on particular historical and present-day resonances of style. These are by and large undeveloped bodies of work and they sit uncomfortably together. But not having yet attained a slick resolution of recognisable content and style – an artistic signature – they do not anticipate and foreclose critical and imaginative speculation in the manner of so much photo-art of the present. Indeed they point to potentially interesting futures for the practices of all three artists.

*Others* [Harold David, Alex Kershaw, Vanila Netto], curated by Judy Annear, Art Gallery of New South Wales, 14 September – 10 November 2002



Top: Harold David, *Worthville* 2001

Photo courtesy the artist

Bottom: Vanila Netto, *Outside Chemical and Physical Boundaries*  
[Detected by Interferometers]: *Microvillage*, 2001

Photo courtesy the artist